

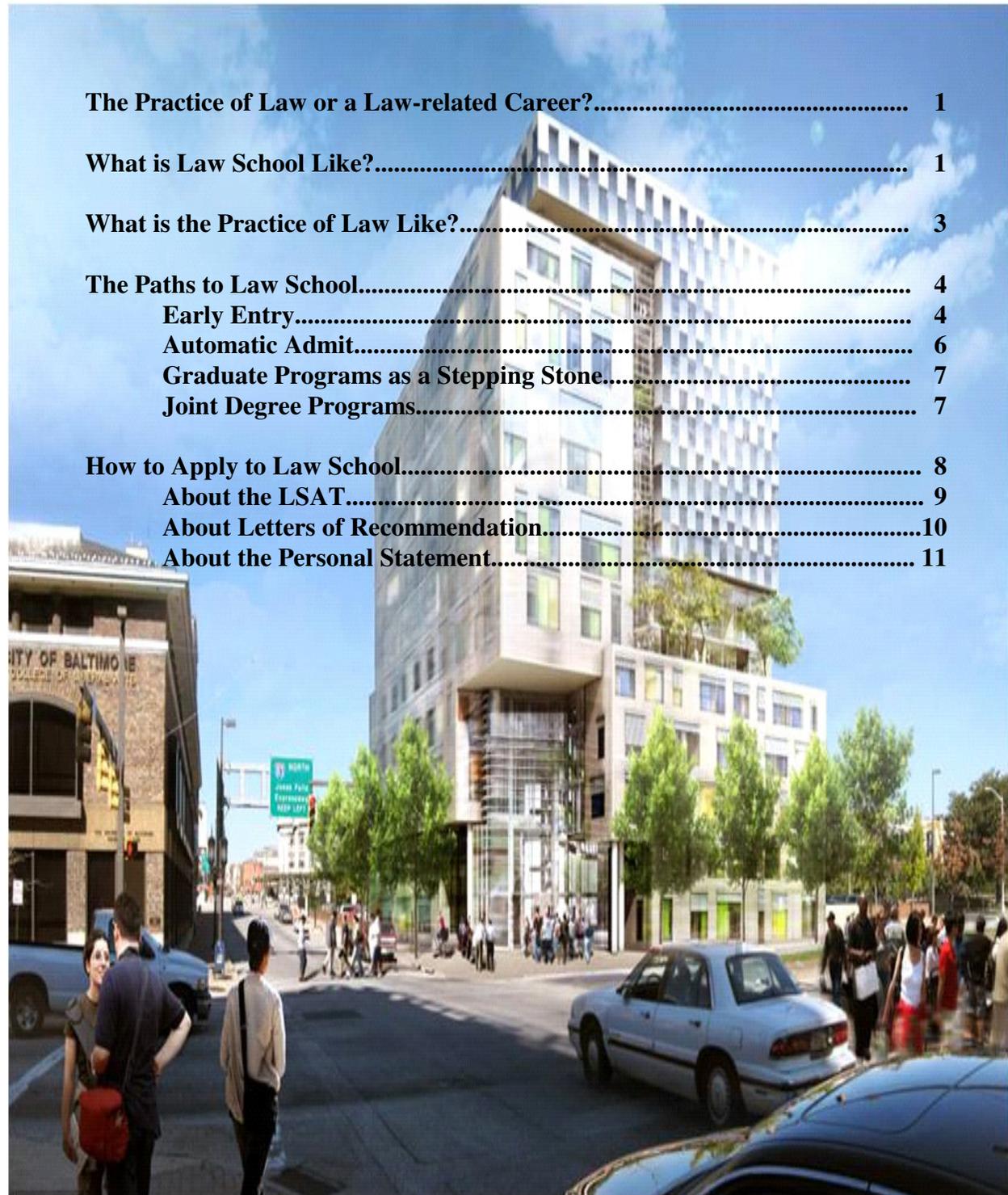


Pre-Law Handbook

Division of Legal, Ethical and
Historical Studies

University of Baltimore

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The Practice of Law or a Law-related Career?

One of the ways to pursue a strong interest in law is by getting a law degree, which is an essential part of the process to becoming a lawyer. However, going to law school to get a JD (*juris doctor*) degree is not the only way that a person can go into a law-related career. Legal knowledge and skill is also used by nonlawyers who work as paralegals, legal assistants, court personnel, compliance officers, law enforcement and corrections officers, agents, tax preparers, and in many other occupations. Accordingly, many of those strongly interested in law forego law school and pursue one of these options instead. Law school is an important goal for those interested in law to consider, but it is not the only one. Going to law school is, however, currently the only path to becoming a lawyer and engaging in the professional practice of law. This booklet provides some background information to help you with making the decision whether the going to law school and becoming a lawyer is for you.

What is Law School Like?

Law school curriculums tend to be similar to each other, because they have to follow American Bar Association (ABA) guidelines. Law school environments tend to be somewhat similar to each other as well, because they are populated by the kind of people who want to be lawyers (or who already are). Most law schools offer similar three-year programs to the JD degree, and many also offer part-time programs, including “night school,” that may take a little longer than three years but are otherwise much the same as the regular JD programs.

Typically, law schools have a set of required courses for first year students (or the equivalent) in areas such as Contract Law, Criminal Law, Torts, and Property. The first year also often includes a required legal writing course. There may be no elective courses or just a single elective. Even the second year may be taken up by a number of required courses. Some schools offer “lawyering” courses that focus on skills such as negotiation, legal problem-solving, drafting documents, examining witnesses, etc.

Law school classes, especially in the first year, tend to be large lectures. However, the instruction often involves a significant amount of “Socratic-style” questioning, where students are encouraged to answer difficult questions and to evaluate the validity of the answers given by others.



P r e - L a w H a n d b o o k

(The movie *The Paper Chase* provides an illustration of what the experience can be like, as does Scott Turow's *One L*.)

The third year of law school often includes some sort of internship or clinical component that allows students an opportunity to start using their legal knowledge and skills. Summer internships may also allow students to work at law firms or organizations doing legal work. And after completing the first or second year, students may also have the opportunity to pursue legal scholarship and to work as a staff member on a law journal, editing the articles of others and working on their own legal “note” or “comment” for publication.



Exams are the usual way that students are evaluated, often a single final exam that is the sole source of the grade in a course. Occasionally, especially in electives, there may be a final paper instead. Law school exams tend to involve long “fact patterns” (improbably complicated situations) and students are expected to “spot issues” (recognize where the legal issues arise in the situation described) rather than do deep and thorough explanations of particular legal issues. The reason that exams tend to take this format is because the comprehensiveness of student knowledge is more important than depth of knowledge, given that the bar exam that students will face in order to get their license to practice is similarly oriented toward assessing the comprehensiveness of the examinee’s knowledge. Law school papers, on the other hand, may involve more in-depth, analytical work and legal research, because thorough analysis and argument based on a specific, focused legal issue is important to brief-writing and other legal tasks involved in the practice of law.

Law school can be a culture shock for many students. Because the practice of law is often challenging and combative, law professors are generally not out to create nurturing, self-esteem-affirming environments. It can take time to get used to the sometimes brusque style of interaction that is commonplace in law. That is not to say that there aren’t lots of collaborative and supportive interactions as well, but getting used to the culture is part of achieving success in law.

Though law school can be stressful, it is also one of the most eye-opening, mind-blowing educational experiences a person can have. Many people say that law school taught them how to think with a level of rigor and precision that they didn't even realize existed. And important work goes on in law, and getting access to that world is also access to a certain kind of power and capacity to make things happen.

What is the Practice of Law Like?

People generally have a simplistic idea of the practice of law. Because of all the courtroom dramas on TV and in the movies, people imagine that the practice of law mainly involves going to court, facing lots of surprise witnesses and dramatic moments, and winning over the jury by being charismatic and entertaining.

But many lawyers go through their practices without ever trying a court case. Being a lawyer can involve mostly negotiating, legal research, drafting documents, legal advising and planning, and/or handling transactions. And even among those lawyers who do a lot of courtroom practice (called "litigators" or "trial lawyers"), many and perhaps most have styles that are not at all charismatic and entertaining, yet can be highly effective. Successful courtroom lawyers may instead excel because they are psychologically insightful, skilled at investigation, very good at writing legal briefs, particularly expert with the rules of evidence and procedure, and/or doggedly determined.

New lawyers have a range of options for their practice, including "hanging out a shingle" and trying to make a go of it as a solo practitioner (doing whatever legal work walks in through the door), working at a small private law firm (where there may be more specialization), or working at one of the large firms that have a number of U.S. and even international offices (where a new lawyer might focus on developing just one kind of expertise and spend a long apprenticeship



working under an established lawyer). In addition, some new lawyers go to work at corporations as or for “in house counsel.” Or a new lawyer might work for the government as a prosecutor or public defender, or in a government agency or division, which might involve going to court or using the legal skills necessary to administer and develop law and pursue public policy. New lawyers also sometimes work for nonprofit organizations, many of which have legal arms, or in organizations that provide free legal assistance to persons who cannot afford it, such as Legal Aid or organizations that receive Legal Services Corporation funding.

The Paths to Law School

There are a number of paths that people take to and through law school. A few students start law school even before they finish their undergraduate degrees, as in UB law school’s “early entry” program (see further information below). More commonly, people start law school after completing a bachelor’s degree (and UB’s law school offers an “automatic admit” option to well-qualified graduates of UB). Some people go to graduate school and complete a master’s degree or PhD prior to going to law school (see “Graduate School as a Stepping Stone” below). And some pursue joint degrees (see further information below), getting both a J.D. and another advanced degree at the same time.

Early Entry

Current undergraduates can enter UB’s law school even before they have finished their bachelor’s degree if they meet the eligibility requirements for early entry. The early entry program allows students to use credits earned in law school to count both toward the completion of their bachelor’s degree and toward the law degree. To take advantage of this option, you need to have

- a cumulative cross-institutional grade point average of 3.50 or better, and
- an LSAT score of 155 or better (ideally taken no later than February of the calendar year in which you’d like to enter law school).

(Information about the LSATs can be found in the How to Apply to Law School section of this handbook. The LSAC website indicates the test dates and locations for the LSAT, which is offered

four times each year. The LSAC website also arranges for the Credential Assembly Service, which calculates your GPA in the format used by law schools and arranges for your application and LSAT scores to be sent to law schools.)

Meetings with your advisor to plan early entry should begin before registering for classes at UB or otherwise as soon as possible. Consultation with the advisor is imperative because many core courses are offered during fall or spring semesters only, and advance planning is critical in order for students to make sure that they will have the coursework done in time to qualify for early entry. Students must have the appropriate combination of required courses, in addition to having completed three-quarters of the bachelor's degree. For degree programs that have a required capstone course typically taken in the senior year, it is also necessary for the student to arrange to complete that course in the junior year.

Please note that once you accept early admission, to receive your bachelor's degree you must apply for graduation during the last semester of your first year of law school.

If you have been dropped, suspended, warned, placed on academic or disciplinary probation, disciplined, expelled, or requested or advised to resign from any postsecondary school, college, university, professional school or law school; have ever been charged with a crime, other than with a minor traffic violation, for which charges have not been expunged; have ever been or are they now a defendant to a civil suit; or have ever been discharged from employment/armed forces under condition other than honorable, then you cannot be early admitted but must go through the regular admissions process.

In addition, the law school reserves the right to increase the grade point average and the LSAT score required on an annual basis for the early entry program.

You may still be considered for early entry if you have either the required GPA or LSAT score, even if not both, as long as you have completed all the necessary coursework and are otherwise qualified. However, you will be presumptively admitted if you have both.

Automatic Admit

You can be automatically admitted into the entering class of the UB School of Law following graduation if you

- are a graduate of a University of Baltimore undergraduate program,
- have a cumulative cross-institutional grade point average of 3.35 or better, and
- earn an LSAT score of 154 or better.

If you are interested in this option:

- apply to the UB School of Law (applications must be received by April 1 for admission the following fall; you are always encouraged to apply before March 1)
- take the LSAT ideally no later than February of the calendar year in which you'd like to enter the law school.

(Information about the LSATs can be found in the How to Apply to Law School section of this handbook. The LSAC website indicates the test dates and locations for the LSAT, which is offered four times each year. The LSAC website also arranges for the Credential Assembly Service, which calculates your GPA in the format used by law schools and arranges for your application and LSAT scores to be sent to law schools.)

However, if you have been dropped, suspended, warned, placed on academic or disciplinary probation, disciplined, expelled, or requested or advised to resign from any postsecondary school, college, university, professional school or law school; have ever been charged with a crime, other than with a minor traffic violation, for which charges have not been expunged; have ever been or are they now a defendant to a civil suit; or have ever been discharged from employment/armed forces under condition other than honorable, then you cannot be automatically admitted but must go through the regular admissions process.

The law school reserves the right to increase the grade point average and the LSAT score required on an annual basis for the early entry program.

If you are not automatically admitted, if you apply you will still be considered for admission through the regular admissions process.

Graduate Programs as a Stepping Stone

Not everyone follows the typical path of getting a bachelor's degree and then going directly on to law school. Some people instead use a graduate degree as a “stepping stone” to law school. Some law school applicants get a PhD first, often in a complementary discipline such as business, economics, or political science.

However, the commitment involved in getting a PhD is not for everyone. Masters' degrees in criminal justice, negotiations and conflict management, legal and ethical studies, or in some other complementary field can also help smooth the way to law school. The advantages of graduate study include: a chance to improve your record for application to law school, opportunities to explore other options in law-related careers, and getting an education that will make you a more well-rounded law student and attorney.



Joint Degree Programs

Many law schools offer joint degree programs for students who want to get a law degree and another advanced degree simultaneously. For example, UB's law school offers joint degree programs in business administration with the Merrick School of Business; in negotiations and conflict management, public administration, and criminal justice in the College of Public Affairs; and a J.D./Ph.D in Policy Science with the UMBC Graduate School.

How to Apply to Law School

The basic ingredients for applying to law school are:

1. College and any higher education transcripts
2. LSAT scores
3. Letters of recommendation and/or other kinds of evaluations
4. Personal statement

Law schools screening applicants tend to fill a certain portion of their seats simply based on GPAs and LSAT scores. However, law schools also fill a certain portion of their seats by looking more closely at applicants' entire record, including letters of recommendation and personal statement, which are particularly important ingredients for applicants with weaker GPAs or LSAT scores. To put it another way, if you are an applicant who doesn't have a high GPA and LSAT score, it is especially important to make sure that you have a strong application when it comes to the letters of recommendation and your personal statement.

It is also helpful to keep in mind two other tactics: apply early, and apply to a sufficient number of schools. Many schools have rolling admissions processes, so applying early allows you to be considered before seats for the next class have mostly been filled. Applying to a sufficient number of schools is a good idea because different law schools have different degrees of selectiveness, different priorities in what they are looking for in applicants, and different applicant pools.

What amounts to a sufficient number of schools to apply to is a judgment call. While it makes no sense to apply to schools that you would never consider attending, it might be a good idea to apply to every school that you would consider going to, particularly if your record is weaker than that of the typical applicant. Further, some smaller, less famous schools can offer interesting, cutting edge programs that make them worth checking out in any event (though make sure they are ABA-accredited).

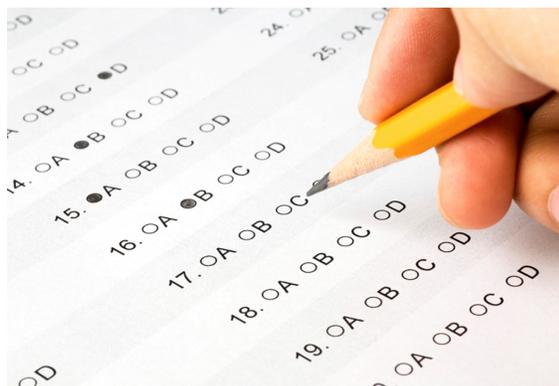
In general, you should focus on the schools located in the State where you would most like to practice law (as the curriculum may provide more relevant coursework, and you will have more opportunities to develop local connections and have more opportunities for internships in State). But

you can take the bar exam in any State no matter where you go to law school, so you shouldn't limit yourself to the schools located in your preferred State. To improve your odds of being accepted to some law school, consider expanding your applications to include the schools in your region, and consider also applying to some far-flung schools that sound particularly interesting.

And if your record is particularly strong, you will want to consider applying to so-called “top tier” schools – schools with national and even international reputations, even if they are not located in the State where you would most like to practice. If your goal is to become a legal academic – to wind up as a law professor – you will definitely want to attend one of these top-tier schools.

About the LSAT

The Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) is required for admission to most law schools. The test is given four times a year in February, June, October and December. The Law School Admission Council (LSAC) administers the test. Their website lists all test dates and allows students to register for the test online: <http://www.lsac.org/> The LSAT comprises three types of multiple choice questions that focus on reading comprehension, analytical reasoning, and logical reasoning, and takes about half a day.



Most students benefit from taking one or more practice tests before taking the LSATs. Getting used to the question formats and having reached a certain comfort level with the materials can help make the taking of the test less stressful and a better measure of what you are capable of. Some free LSAT materials to help you prepare can be found at

<http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/lsat-prep-materials.asp>

In addition, copies of past tests can be purchased from LSAC or from Amazon.com, and libraries may carry helpful materials as well. Free instructional videos can be found online.

If you feel you would benefit from a professional LSAT prep course, there are many options available. Two options that have received excellent feedback from many students over the years are:

Merlin LSAT Prep: <http://merlinlegal.net/LSAT-Courses-In-MD.html>

UMBC Test Prep: <http://www.umbc.edu/testprep/lsat.html>

Kaplan, Princeton Review, and other companies also offer prep courses.

Keep in mind that while doing well on the LSATs improves your chances of getting into law school and your first choice law school, the LSATs are a part of your application and may not by themselves prevent you from getting into a law school or guarantee that you will get in. Schools are aware that the LSATs are not great predictors of who will do well in law school or who will make a good lawyer, so they are generally considered in context of the rest of your record.

If you take the LSAT and don't do as well as you did on the practice tests, then nervousness or not feeling up to par was probably a factor. You may want to take the test again, perhaps after more preparation or working on getting more relaxed and comfortable with the testing experience.

If you are sure that you performed badly on the test, you may cancel your scores within six calendar days of taking the exam. Please see the policy on the LSAC site: <http://www.lsac.org/jd/lsat/lsat-score.asp#cancel>

You may not take the LSAT more than three times in any two-year period. This policy applies even if you cancel your score or if your score is not otherwise reported.

For more information about the LSATs, visit the LSAC website.

About Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are an important part of the application process. You should approach professors, employers, and/or other persons able to describe your qualifications for law school including especially your academic abilities and accomplishments, and other personal attributes that would make you a good law student and lawyer.

Letters may be sent electronically or on paper but be sure to provide the recommender with your LSAC identification form, which may be found once you establish an LSAC account. More information can be found at the LSAC site at <http://www.lsac.org/jd/apply/cas-lor-evaluations.asp>

About the Personal Statement

The personal statement is a chance for you to convey to law schools that:

- you have a commitment to and a passionate interest in the law, and the maturity and judgment to enter the legal profession
- you have a strong, analytical mind and enjoy intellectual challenges
- you write well and know how to make a point
- you can explain any weaknesses in your record (in a way that indicates that you are nonetheless capable of the demanding academic work of law school, and that you aren't defensive and know how to learn from your experiences, including your mistakes).

Some hints:

Don't use the personal statement to repeat what is in the rest of your record (though feel free to highlight whatever is strongest). Use the personal statement primarily to add something to your "pitch." Why should this law school accept you? What contributions can you make to the law school community and to the legal profession?

Don't resort to flowery language, and put away your thesaurus. It's more important to express your ideas clearly and to convey a sense of who you are than trying to sound smart.

Don't be vague or abstract. If you have concrete examples or specific facts that can help get across what you're talking about, use them.

Develop your ideas, making sure you explain them fully. A lot of short paragraphs tends to come across as flighty. On the other hand, make sure that you break for a new paragraph whenever you make a new point or move on to a new idea.

Put your best foot forward – proofread and then proofread again. Although it isn't really fair to hold a typo or two against someone, understand that when you're competing against others who are just like you but didn't make any mistakes, you're going to lose out.

Notes
