

Telling Your Story: Leveraging the Written Parts of Your Law School Application

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Narrative Pieces in the Application

- Personal Statement
- Diversity Statement (Required and Optional)
- Other Statement(s) (Required and Optional)
- Required Addenda
- Discretionary Addenda
- Other Questions/Explanations
- Resume
- BUT THEY ARE ALL PART OF ONE “WHOLE” – YOU!!



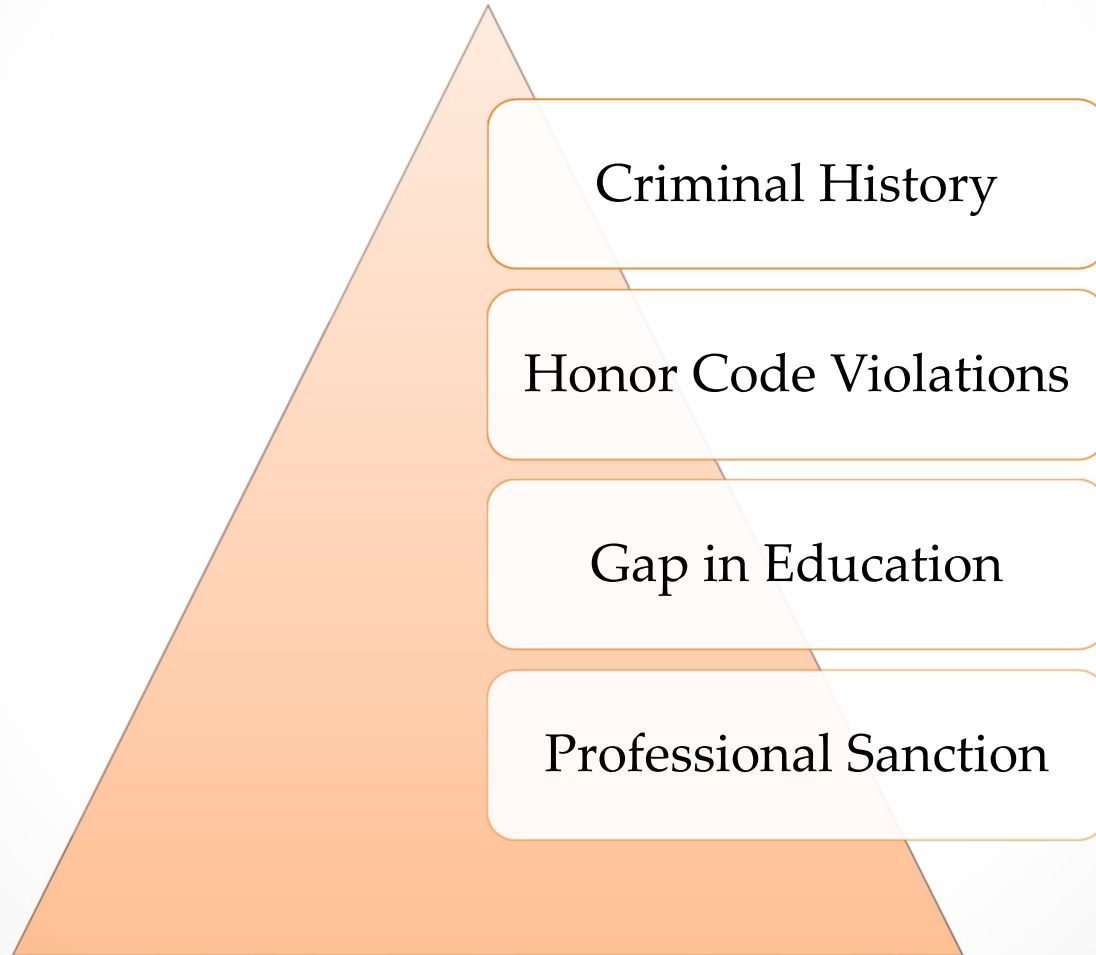
Personal
Statement

Diversity/Other
Statements

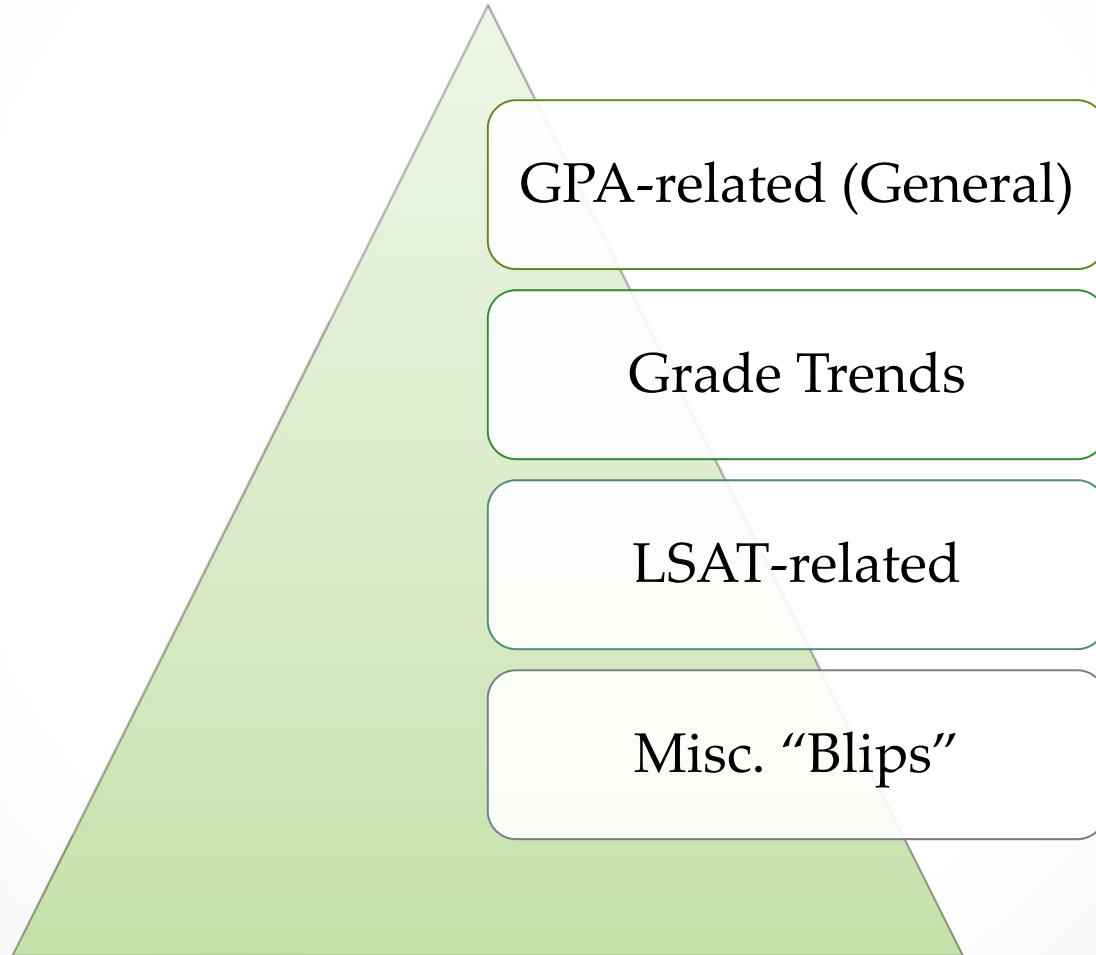
Required
Addenda

Optional
Addenda

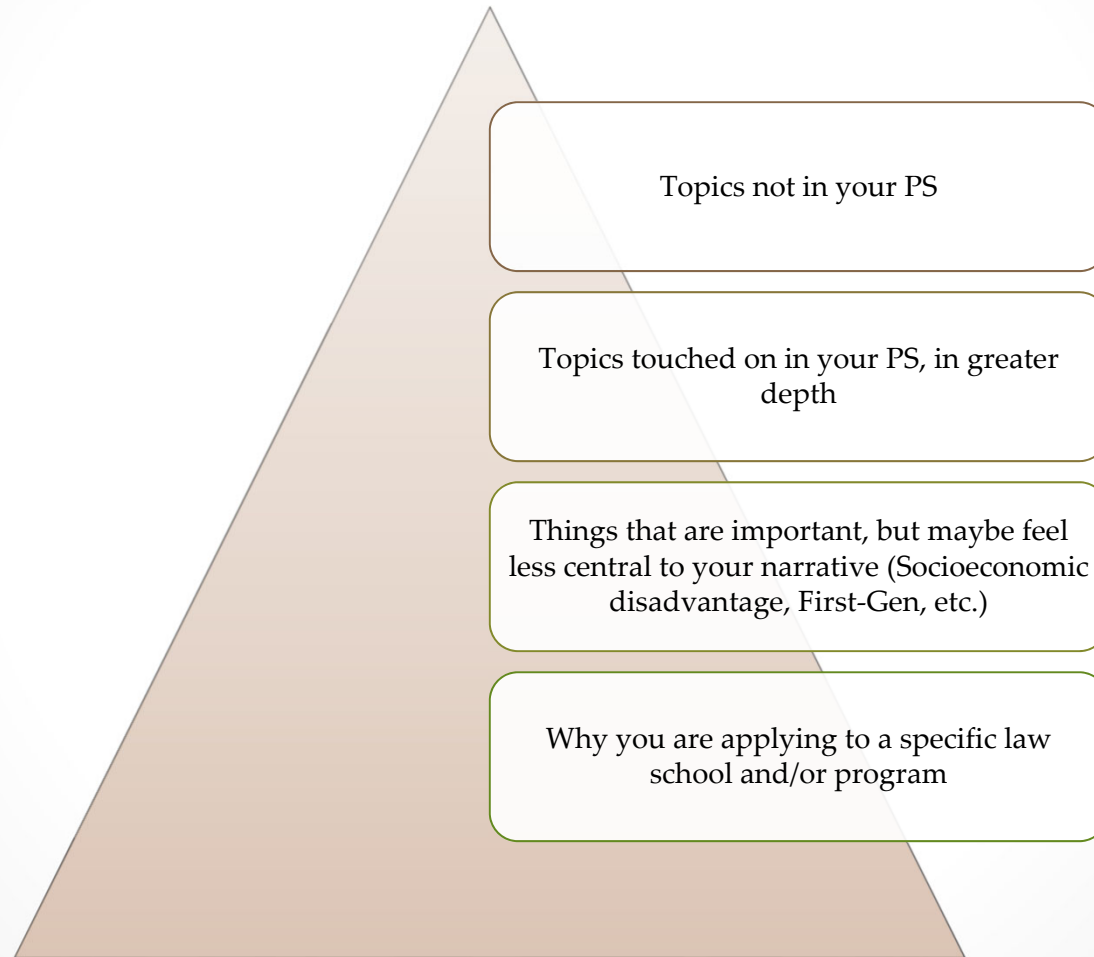
(Typical) Required Addenda



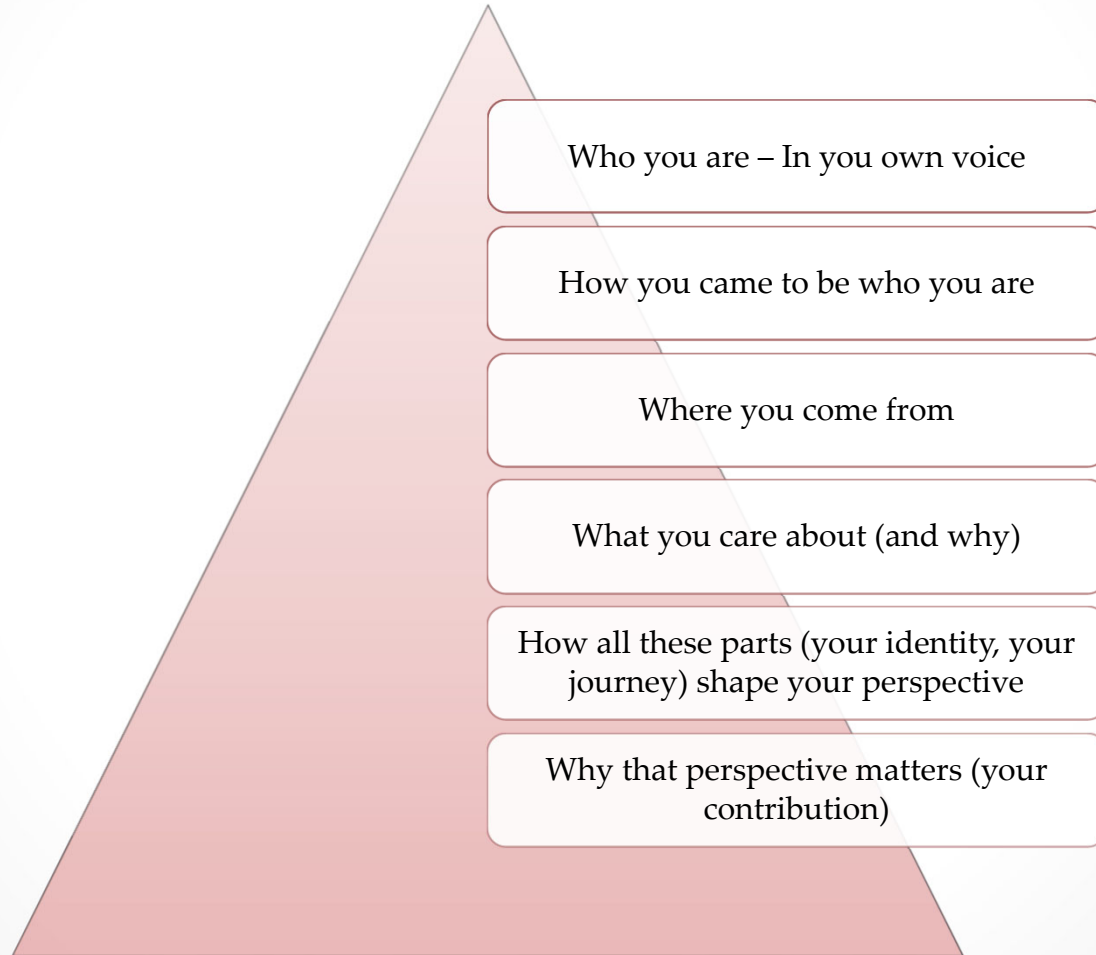
Optional Addenda



Diversity or Other Statement(s)



Personal Statement



RULE #1

- In reality, there is only one rule for Personal Statements:

Follow the Directions



Personal Statement

- A PS is NOT a Statement of Purpose.
 - SoP asks: What do you want to study? Why do you want to study it? What experience do you have in your field? Who would you like to work with? What unique scholarly contribution will you make in your field? What do you plan to do with your degree once you have it?
 - None of these questions must be answered by your PS.
- This is truly an essay, and it supposed to be truly PERSONAL. Average 2 pages; Range 250 words – 4 pages.
- Close relationship with your resume.
- We are not looking for a brain in a jar.



Questions to contemplate before starting your PS

- Why is the law school right for you?
- In what ways will having you in the classroom make a difference?
- How do you demonstrate strong potential for leadership?
- How is your academic achievement remarkable?
- Why do you want to attend a specific law school?
- What do we absolutely have to know about you that we would not otherwise be able to discern from your application if not for the fact that you talked about it in your personal statement?
- If we already know what you did (grades, major, work and volunteer experience, test-taking ability, etc.) what else can you tell us? (e.g., **why you picked the things that you picked** and **how they relate to who you are where you are from**)
- What would you tell me if you were able to interview?



Personal Statement Do's

- Use your own voice.
- Tell your own story.
- Be unafraid. Claim your space.
- Have a point.
- Make connections.
- Ask yourself, “What makes me different?” The goal should be to nicely package who you are, not try to cram yourself into the generic package you think we want to receive.



Personal Statement Maybes

- Do you need to (or should you) specifically state why you want to go to law school (generally) or what (specifically) you plan to do with a law degree?
 - Depends on the personal statement – can be a great fit...can also be totally unnecessary.
- Do you need to talk about why you want to go to X or Y Law School specifically?
 - This can be nice...we have egos, too. But probably best not to use up your limited space telling us why our law school is so great (we already know). If you have a lot to say, think about an additional statement like “Why Berkeley Law” and connect it back to you (Why is this law school so perfect FOR YOU? What is it about who you are that makes the schools the right fit? The central theme is still who you are.)
 - Do more than internet research. Talk to people.

Personal Statement Don'ts

- Don't (with a few narrow exceptions):
 - Limit yourself to "law-related" topics.
 - Use a non-essay format. The less "traditional" you get in structure, the better control you must have over your craft. The more risky (emotional, personal) the content is, the less risky the format should be.
 - Write a narrative version of your resume: *"First I did this, then I did this, from that I learned this, next I did this..."*
 - Start with a quote from a famous person.**
 - Tell other people's stories instead of your own.**
 - Especially to be avoided if appropriative and told without permission – but mostly to be avoided because it takes space away from your story.
 - Make claims unsubstantiated by your record.**
 - Write "The TFA Essay" or "The Study Abroad Essay." You are more than one experience.
- NEVER EVER EVER:
 - Use gimmicks (e.g. "The Obituary")
 - Use lazy metaphors (fire, running, oysters, socks...you name it, someone's tried it).
 - Write a legal brief.
 - Make silly grammatical errors.

Specific Concerns as an Underrepresented Applicant

- **“I don’t want to seem like I’m telling a sob story.”**
 - “It’s never the changes we want that change everything.”
– [Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*](#)
- **“I don’t want to feel like I’m bragging.”**
 - “To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged. Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it is really all that is expected. What I remind myself, regularly, is this: the acknowledgment of my privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered.”
– [Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays*](#)
- **“Why do I always have to write about my race/ethnicity?”**
 - “In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.” – Toni Morrison
- **“But my experience really isn’t all that unique!”**
 - “I’m not so weird to me.”
– [Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*](#)

PS Writing Step #1: Self Study, Journal, Free Write

“...I am human. I am messy. I’m not trying to be an example. I am not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers. I am not trying to say I’m right. I am just trying—trying to support what I believe in, trying to do some good in this world, trying to make some noise with my writing while also being myself.”

— [Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays*](#)

PS Writing Step #2: Making A List

- What am I about? What are my characteristics, experiences, attributes, etc.?
- Is everything on this list important to understanding who I am? Is what's important to understanding who I am on this list?
- Is everything on this list even slightly relevant to my endeavor (writing a personal statement for law school)?
- Is everything on this list something I'm comfortable talking about?

*Pursue the authentic—decide first
what is authentic,
then go after it with all your heart.
Your heart, that place
you don't even think of cleaning out.
That closet stuffed with savage mementos.*

- — [Louise Erdrich](#), [Original Fire: Selected and New Poems](#)



Sidebar: Hot Topics

- Sexual Violence or Abuse
- Domestic Violence (Witness and/or Victim)
 - Mental Health
 - Criminal History
 - Substance Abuse
- LGBTQ, Gender Identity and Representation
 - Immigration Status
 - And more...



PS Writing Step #3: Divide and Conquer

- Where do I put this stuff?
 - Remember – you have a lot of potential places to locate these bits of information. All of the parts of the application are up for grabs.
- Things can overlap across different written pieces, but should not be redundant. Anything you add should be **necessary** and **new**.



PS Writing Step #4: Group Attributes

- What things on your list “go together”?
- What are the Big Picture ideas? Themes? Meta-themes?
- Examples: Perseverance, Resilience, Advocacy, Translation, Curiosity, Risk-Taking, Overcoming, Relationship with the Law, Potential, Leadership, etc.
- How do these things work together to tell people who I am?



PS Writing Step #5: Put Meat on the Bones

- Link examples and anecdotes to themes and ideas.
- Where will my examples fit as support for assertions about my attributes and/or potential contribution(s)?



PS Writing Step #6: Put It Back Together Again

- Overarching Theme
- Connection to law school?
 - Sub-Theme A
 - Example 1
 - Sub-Theme B
 - Example 1
 - Example 2
 - Sub-Theme C
 - Example 1
- Conclusion (re-connect to overarching theme and law school)
- **“When we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so also are we, sentence by sentence, until the story takes shape.”**
— [Louise Erdrich, *The Plague of Doves*](#)

PS Writing Step #7: Actually Start Writing

- The Writing Process
 - List
 - Analyze
 - Outline
 - Draft
 - Revise
 - Re-Draft
 - Edit
 - Circulate for feedback
 - Re-Draft
 - Finalize
 - Sleep on it
 - Refine
 - Sleep on it again
 - Submit

PS Writing Step #8: Edit, Edit, Edit

- Writing Basics for Flow, Form, and Style
 - An admissions officer's secret identity: the Grammar Police.
 - No incomplete or run-on sentences.
 - Count your commas, colons, and semi-colons.
 - Circle your starting words.
 - Vary sentence length.
 - Avoid the passive voice – “had” is not your friend.
- Sometimes less is more – no need to go crazy with the adjectives. We are not impressed with your prodigious lexicon, your proficiency with a veritable profusion of recondite, abstruse jargon, or your legal phraseology. I just want to know you can write a good sentence and that you have your own story to tell.
- **Good books: Elements of Style (Strunk and White), A Rulebook for Arguments (Weston), The New Oxford Guide to Writing (Kane), On Writing Well (Zinsser), Naked, Drunk, and Writing: Shed Your Inhibitions and Craft a Compelling Memoir (Lara).**

PS Writing Step #9: Quality Control

- Sharing with others for suggestions, edits, feedback.
- Don't rely on Spell Check.
- Avoid using a specific law school name – or do so with extreme caution.
- Read it out loud. Does it sound like you?



PS Writing Step #10: Actually Press Send

“Perfection to me is, I walk away from a situation and say, 'I did everything I could do right there. There was nothing more that I could do.’” - Drake



Diversity Statement (DS)

- Refer back to your list. Did anything important not make it into your PS? If no, no need for a DS (unless the school asks for one). If yes...
 - Is that missing information critical to understanding who you are? If no, no need for a DS (unless the school asks for one). If yes...
 - Repeat PS writing process.
- Note – We're using the generic admissions definition of the word diversity. Not limited to racial/ethnic identities.



Addenda 101: Required Addenda

- Typical Reasons an addendum is required: Legal problems (particularly criminal), student conduct or Honor Code violations, break in education...
- READ THE QUESTION CAREFULLY.
- ERR ON THE SIDE OF DISCLOSURE.
- BE TRUTHFUL AND TRANSPARENT.
- TAKE RESPONSIBILITY.
- Length – 1 paragraph to 1 page.



EXAMPLE

Misconduct

- If you answer "Yes" to any of the questions below, please attach an addendum explaining the circumstances. Note that an affirmative answer to these question does not necessarily preclude or even prejudice admission to Berkeley Law. Your answer will be reviewed on an individual basis in relation to all aspects of your experience, academic achievement, and potential. If your answer to any of the following questions becomes affirmative after you submit your application, you are required to notify the Admissions Office in writing.
- **1. Have you ever been arrested for or convicted of any offense, excluding minor traffic and parking violations, or is any such charge now pending against you? Yes No**
- **2. Have you ever been subjected to a dismissal, suspension, probation, or other disciplinary or academic sanction by any college, university, or professional school? Yes No**
- **3. Have you ever been subject to discipline by a professional organization? Yes No**



Addenda 201: Optional Addenda

- Explanations and context for “blips.” Think of them as footnotes for your CAS report.
 - GPA: grade trend, outlier grades, rigor of major, school, etc.
 - LSAT score: Multiple scores, Non-predictive for grades, score cancellation, etc.
 - **PLEASE REALLY BE SURE YOU ACTUALLY NEED TO WRITE THESE.**
- You’ve just got more to say (e.g., the “Why Berkeley?” essay). Again – do you need it?
- Length: 1 paragraph to 1 page.
- Increasingly, schools are prompting for these (although mostly still keeping them optional). Be prepared to write one, and don’t rely on website review.



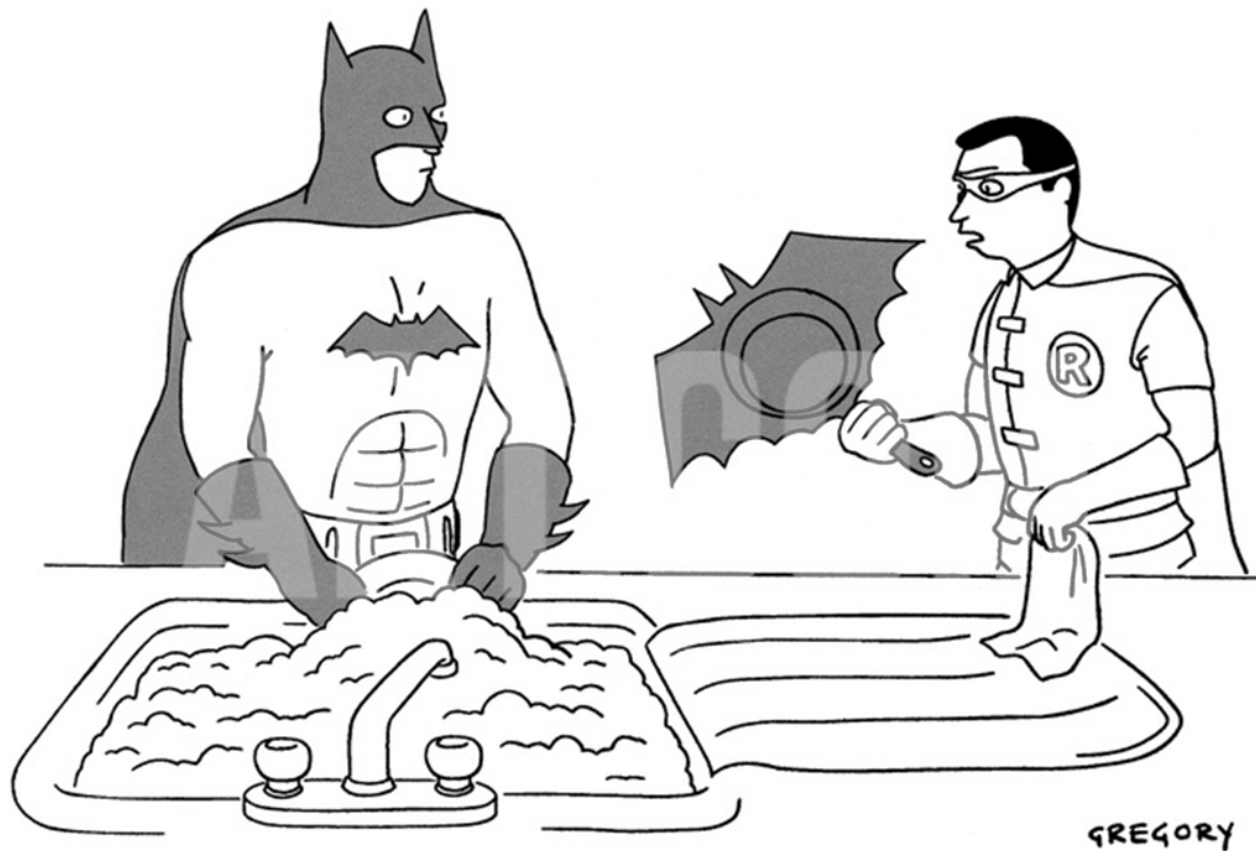
An Approach to Structuring Addenda

The standard format that I recommend is:

- *(1) Start with what you want (we have limited time, you need to tell me right away why I should keep reading)*
- *(2) Identify the issue (I'm going to see it anyway, may as well just put it out there)*
- *(3) Make your best argument/neutralize the issue*
- *(4) End on a positive note. What do you have to offer that (a) there is evidence of in your record, and (b) can't be measured by a standardized test?*
- *Also, be sure to send in a copy of your SAT score report as documentation (or note that documentation is available upon request) if you're writing an LSAT-exception addendum.*



Addenda Sidebar – How many is too many?



"Don't you think the saucepans are overkill?"

A Law School Resume

- Length: 1-2 pages (unless instructed otherwise in the directions!)
- Not a C.V.
 - Geared toward academia or research. Might include areas of interest, grants, publications, teaching experience, lab experience, professional memberships, references... Might contain elements, but you should not "self-edit" to only those things that you think are law-related, prestigious, or even particularly relevant.
- Not trying to get a job! No objective or "key skills summary" is needed.
- This really is a "cheat sheet" or road map for the application reader. I should be able to look at it and go, "Ok, I kinda' get what this person is about."
- Don't get cute.
- No need to tell me you can use MS Word, etc.
- Nothing pre-college.
- Don't assume we know what an activity or organization name means, or what you did in your role. Bullet points are very helpful.



A Law School Resume, continued.

- The key is HEADINGS. Know your options and deploy them strategically to *highlight* your best qualities and *minimize* areas where you might be “lacking.”
- **Always start with Academic/Education.**
- Examples:
 - Education
 - Honors/Awards
 - Experience
 - Employment/Professional
 - Volunteer
 - Leadership
 - Campus Involvement
 - Advocacy
 - Languages
 - Research
 - Presentations
 - Papers
 - Travel
 - Skills
 - Sports
 - Cultural/Community Involvement
 - Other
 - Parenting
 - Hobbies

Don't Self-Edit

Experience

La Señorita Mexican Restaurant, Traverse City, Michigan 11/14 – Present

Server

- Present menus to guests and accurately record orders
- Answer questions about menu selections and make recommendations as requested
- Deliver food orders, remove plates, and clean tables in a fast and friendly manner
- Anticipate and address guests' service needs

Parsons Law Firm, Traverse City, Michigan 9/14 – Present

Legal Intern

- Assist in drafting and reviewing court orders and jury instructions
- Provide note-taking for hearings, interviews, and meetings
- Research case facts and compile notes on evidence
- Perform reception duties including phone calls, coordinating meetings, and filing

Dan's Airport Transportation, Traverse City, Michigan 9/14 – Present

Taxi Driver

- Transport customers in a safe and efficient manner
- Calculate fares and make change as necessary
- Provide friendly and courteous customer service



Closing Thoughts

- Nothing else has any efficacy, I might as well be myself.
 - But your yourself sucks!
 - It is, lamentably, all I have.
- [Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*](#)

