

Winthrop House
Pre-Law Handbook 2014-2015

INTRODUCTION

Why law school?

No matter what your reason for considering law school, it is important to grapple with the root of your aspiration before committing to the application process. The question "Why law school?" will in part answer *where* you might like to study the law, whether you might like to defer applying for a while, and, most importantly, whether you really wish to go to law school at all.

Law school represents many different possibilities: the opportunity to become an attorney in the private sector; preparation for a career in government or politics; a path to work in non-profit organizations; or background experience for the world of business and consulting. Law school is *not*, however, an extension of college. It is a professional school focused on the law, not on government or general public policy. You will feel an immediate difference upon entering law school and its pre-professional, rather than liberal arts, culture. Law school is also expensive: the three-year budget for many schools tops \$240,000, leaving many graduates with significant levels of debt. Thus, you should explore all of the resources at Winthrop House, as well as the Office of Career Services, to see if law school will serve your professional and life ambitions. Consider sitting in on a first-year law school class to see firsthand what your experience will be like. Attend events at the law school as a means to explore possible legal careers. All of the members of the Winthrop House pre-law team, and in particular your individual pre-law advisor, are available to help you think about whether it makes sense for you to apply to law school in light of your interests for the future.

Is now the right time to apply to law school?

Many students ask if they should take time off, either for personal reasons or to gain a strategic advantage in applying to law school. More than ever, law schools now recognize that students who take time off may be better prepared for, and happier at, law school. The Winthrop House pre-law team encourages students who want to take a break from their studies, or who are interested in other potential career paths, to take time off after college. Some students choose to apply to law school in their senior year and then defer enrollment at their chosen school. Law schools generally grant one-year deferrals easily, and sometimes two-year deferrals. With that said, in most cases even a one-year deferral will require a non-refundable financial deposit and will prevent you from applying (or re-applying) to other law schools. This limits your flexibility should you decide during your deferral year that you want to attend law school elsewhere. Other students choose not to start the application process until they are ready to attend law school. This is an especially good option if you think that your application would improve with the addition of work or travel experience, and/or senior-year grades. It is also a good option if you are unsure about whether you want to go to law school in the first place, or about when you want to go.

Either way, *if you are seriously considering law school*, you should go through Winthrop's pre-law process. Before you graduate, have letters of recommendation sent to the Resident Dean's Office so that we will have them on file at Winthrop House. This will allow you to apply to law school in the future without having to track down professors and advisors who might not remember you well and would have to recount your college career years later. It is therefore to your advantage to participate in the pre-law process *before* graduation.

Note - HLS Junior Deferral Program (JDP): Harvard Law School allows students enrolled at Harvard College to apply for admission to HLS by February 1 of their *junior year*, and commit to deferring their enrollment at HLS for 2 years after graduating. While this program may be appropriate for students with clearly defined career interests, it is not for everyone. Furthermore there is absolutely no penalty in the admissions process for not applying as a junior. If you are a sophomore or junior and uncertain whether JDP might be right for you, please contact the Resident Law Tutor, Tarek Austin (taustin@jd16.law.harvard.edu).

About this Handbook and the Application Process

This Handbook summarizes the process of preparing your law school applications. If you are applying this year, you must follow the schedule outlined herein. The pre-law team – including Gregg Peeples, the Resident Dean (wi-abrd@fas.harvard.edu), and Dennis Mallinson (mallins@fas.harvard.edu), the Assistant to the Resident Dean – will assume that you are familiar with this Handbook. **Your advisor will also direct you back to the handbook for questions that can easily be answered by it.**

If you do not submit your materials in a timely fashion, then while every reasonable effort will be made to assist your candidacy, the House cannot make any assurances with respect to the date on which your application packages will be sent to the law schools that you requested.

Law schools operate on a *rolling admissions* basis. As the year progresses, an increasing number of applicants compete for a decreasing pool of admission slots. The sooner you apply, the better your chances, and the sooner you are likely to hear back.

LSAC, LSAT, AND LSDAS

Winthrop House and the pre-law team are not involved in the business of the Law School Admission Council ("LSAC") and two core functions that it administers in the law school admissions process: the Law School Admission Test ("LSAT") and the Law School Data Assembly Service ("LSDAS"). **The first thing that you should do in starting the law school admissions process is to visit the LSAC website (<http://www.lsac.org>) and create an account.**

The LSAT

When Should I Take the LSAT?

You should next register through LSAC for the LSAT, which is administered four times each year at test site locations across the country. The relevant test dates for the 2014-2015 law school admissions cycle are listed on the LSAC website. Please note that it is in your best interest to have taken the LSAT and completed your application package *prior to December*. With that said, if you are disappointed with your results on the October administration, then sitting the December administration is not only a possible strategic move, it is likely advisable.

If you are currently a sophomore or junior planning to submit law school applications in your senior year, we strongly encourage you to consider taking the LSAT in February of your junior year. While you would of course have to begin your preparation during your junior fall semester, J-term gives you nearly the entire month of January in which to concentrate solely on LSAT preparation, without the distractions of classes and extracurricular activities. This is an advantage to taking the February exam: it will be much easier for you to properly prepare.

How Should I Prepare for the LSAT?

Proper preparation for the LSAT is crucial to the success of your application process. Your LSAT score is perhaps the most important piece of information that will be included in your application package.

Luckily, unlike some other standardized tests, the LSAT is *not* a rote memorization test. Rather, the LSAT is a predictable, skill-based exam that specifically tests your logical reasoning, reading comprehension, argument analysis, and analytical pattern recognition skills. While these are skills you all have, only with consistent and disciplined practice will you be able to hone your skills to the particular question styles of the LSAT. Do not rely on your general ability to do well on standardized tests: if you are committed to applying to law school, commit yourself to proper and thorough preparation.

There are different approaches to preparing for the LSAT. Various LSAT preparation courses (i.e. Kaplan, 180 LSAT, etc.) can offer valuable structure to your review process. With that said, many successful applicants do not enroll in any course whatsoever; if you choose not to enroll or are unable to enroll, rest assured that you can still achieve your full potential on the LSAT. If you are a self-motivating individual and feel confident that you will dedicate yourself to the necessary preparation, then you will perhaps be best off working on your own. A practice test can provide helpful clues about whether a preparation course is suitable for you. You can download a practice LSAT from the LSAC website.

If you choose to prepare on your own, then it is best to purchase a single preparation resource. LSAC produces a series that includes the titles "10 Actual, Official LSAT Pretests," "Another 10," "10 More," and "The Next 10," all available through Amazon.com or other booksellers. These publications are very useful. As their titles indicate, they each include ten *real* LSATs, answer sheets, answer keys, and scoring tables. There is no better way to prepare for the LSAT than by grappling with past administrations of the test.

REMEMBER: there are no surprises here: the LSAT that you eventually take will very closely resemble LSAT tests administered in the past. If you are interested in preparation materials that will provide assistance for particular question types, most of the major test preparation companies publish an LSAT review book that will give you helpful and important tips that you would otherwise have gotten through a preparation course.

If you choose to prepare on your own: at the start of your preparation process, sit down and take a single test, in its entirety and under realistic testing conditions. Your result on this first practice run will help focus your preparation over subsequent weeks. From there on, the mechanics of preparation are best left to your discretion. Drill particular sections of the test that give you trouble. Sit additional tests in their entirety. However you choose to prepare, attempt to design your preparation so that you reach somewhat of a fevered pitch on the week before the test. You want to feel prepared and eager to write the examination, but at the same time, you still want to feel fresh.

LSDAS

The second function of LSAC is LSDAS, which will assemble and transmit your LSAT score to the law schools to which you apply. LSDAS will also transmit your undergraduate transcript, personal statement, and resume. You must submit your transcript directly to LSDAS for this purpose. In general, you should submit *all* materials to LSDAS *as soon as possible*, since there are occasional delays in processing applications. Your personal statement and resume can be easily uploaded to your LSDAS account. Finally, LSDAS will enable you to complete and submit the online law school application itself through your LSAC account.

LSDAS & Recommendation Letters

Your recommendation letters should be submitted to schools through LSDAS.

Once all of your designated recommendation letters have been received in the House Office, Dennis Mallinson will promptly send them to LSAC on your behalf so that they can be uploaded to your LSDAS application account. For this reason, it is very important that your recommendation letters are received in the House Office in a timely manner. In order for Dennis to send your letters to LSAC on your behalf, you must generate a LOR (Letter of Recommendation) Form through your LSDAS account, for each individual recommender. Please see below for instructions on generating LOR forms through LSDAS.

WINTHROP HOUSE PRE-LAW ADVISING

Current undergraduates and qualified alumni of Winthrop House can take advantage of individual pre-law advising resources. Both undergraduate and qualified alumni applicants will be paired with an individual pre-law advisor. You will first have the opportunity to meet with the pre-law advising team at the pre-law informational meeting, which will be held in early September in Winthrop. In subsequent weeks, arrange to meet with your advisor either over a meal at Winthrop House or elsewhere to discuss the state of your application. These meetings afford you the opportunity to raise questions about your personal statement, and also for your advisor to learn about you as an applicant and as a person. Your advisor will also be glad to take you to a class – this is a great way to see if you can imagine yourself as a law student. If there is not a convenient time for you to attend class with your advisor – or you wish to attend a different class – please inform the Resident Law Tutor, Tarek Austin (taustin@jd16.law.harvard.edu).

NOTE: Students or alumni who first notify the pre-law advising team *after December 1st* that they are applying to law school and wish to take advantage of Winthrop House's pre-law advising services place themselves in a precarious position. While reasonable efforts will be undertaken on behalf of such late applicants, there is no guarantee that accommodations will be made. Note that generally applications are not processed in the spring term.

Letters of Recommendation

Collecting letters of recommendation is one of the most important tasks in the application process. Ideally, you should request letters prior to the fall in which you wish to apply to law school. The law school admission committees will read at least two, and usually no more than three, letters of recommendation, which together form an integral part of your application.

The Resident Dean's Office keeps a folder containing all official information about your career at Harvard College. Your file may already contain letters of recommendation that you solicited in the past. Dennis Mallinson, Assistant to the Resident Dean (mallins@fas.harvard.edu), will be able to tell you which letters of recommendation your file already contains. These letters can often be updated or expanded, especially in those situations in which you have remained in association with a former recommender - for example, by staying on the team or doing additional work (research or employment), perhaps with additional responsibilities. You may also want to solicit additional letters of recommendation from people who have not previously written on your behalf.

Most schools require *two* letters of recommendation. *Academic letters are strongly preferred – you must include at least two letters from people who can evaluate your work in an academic setting, including class participation and written work.* This does not mean, however, that you should request *only two* letters from faculty or teaching fellows, or that you should limit your requests to *academic* acquaintances. With respect to letters of recommendation, it is a good idea to keep an extra option or two open. It is a good idea to have three or four law school recommendation letters on file, *at least two of which are academic.* Your other letters can be from people who know you well in non-academic capacities: an employer, a coach, or a director. Most law schools will let you send three letters, and it is good to have an additional letter available in case your application is placed on hold or you are put on a waitlist and want to send additional materials. **However, initial applications to any given school should include at most three letters.** Submitting more letters is nearly always redundant and may actually weaken your application.

There is a simple procedure for requesting a letter of recommendation. First, for each letter of recommendation you are seeking, fill out a "Request for Recommendation" Form, waiving or retaining your right to see the letter. Deliver this form to each of your recommenders, along with a stamped envelope addressed to:

Office of the Resident Dean Winthrop House D-11
Harvard University
Cambridge, MA 02138
Attn: Pre-Law Materials

Give your recommender sufficient lead time - at least one month - to write your letter. You may wish to arrange in person for the letters to be written, perhaps by making an appointment to see your recommender, or by dropping by during office hours. This gives your recommender a chance to chat with you about your objectives and refresh his or her memory about you as a person. You might bring along a copy of your resume, past class work, and your personal statement. Approach your recommender courteously, and provide them with all the materials they will need so that they can write most persuasively on your behalf. If they have already written a letter for you that is in your House file, then we will happily forward a copy to the recommender for updating, if you wish. Dennis Mallinson will assist you with this matter. If you do not hear from a recommender, remember to be politely persistent. Checking in after a few weeks is perfectly acceptable, as long as it is done with courtesy.

REMEMBER: DON'T BE SHY! Recommending students is part of a professor's job – it probably was not too long ago that they had people recommending them for schools and jobs. Also, don't pick your recommenders based on prestige alone – teaching fellows often write fantastic letters

of recommendation. What recommenders can say about your work matters much more than their title. Also note that some professors are willing to co-sign letters actually written by a teaching fellow for their course. Don't be afraid to ask!

Remind the recommender to mail the letter to the Resident Dean's Office, along with the "Request for Recommendation" Form. Please note that *no letters of recommendation are to be mailed directly to law schools*. Note also that the request form you signed and gave to each recommender, indicating whether you waived or retained your right to see the letter, must be received at the same time as the recommendation letter itself, so that we know what arrangements you made with your recommender regarding confidentiality. It is your responsibility to stay in touch with Dennis Mallinson to ensure that your letters of recommendation arrive on time.

The choice of which letters of recommendation you send as part of your application is yours. In past years, the Resident Dean and individual pre-law advisors had some limited ability to guide you in the choice of confidential letters. Because of increasingly stringent University guidelines on confidentiality, however, we are no longer able to do this. Our best advice is to choose recommenders whom you are confident will write a strong letter of recommendation.

Personal Statement

Your pre-law advisors can help you draft and edit the personal statement that will accompany your applications to law school. Perhaps the best way to think about your personal statement is to consider the dilemma of the admissions committee member who will read it: how to turn your words and ideas into a portrait of you as a future member of a legal academic community. The reader's concern is not likely to be swayed by yet another dissertation entitled "Why I want to be a Lawyer." Rather, the aim is for you to envision yourself as a contributor to a common legal intellectual effort – through your experiences, interests, comments, and questions.

Your essay should demonstrate skill at wielding ideas imaginatively, using words artistically, and presenting a story that *concisely* creates an image of yourself. The best topics are those that convey enthusiasm, experience, and imagination. Thesis issues are often a fine topic, but also hobbies, odd moments, or specific insights. It is not a bad idea to subtly tie the theme with hints of legal application, but often this is best left to the reader's imagination. Remember that the personal statement is your only opportunity to express to the admissions committee your personal qualities: MAKE THE MOST OF IT!

REMEMBER:

1. Your personal statement is also the way law schools will evaluate your ability to write, and to proofread. The grammatical correctness of the essay is nearly as important as its substance!
2. Your essay should *not* be a summary of your activities and achievements. Law schools will see your resume and other application materials. It is a waste of time to simply repeat them here and to say that your experiences will make you a good lawyer. Your statement should provide "value-added" to your list of activities, transcripts, and recommendations. Help the admissions committee see that you are smart, academically curious, and have duly considered why you are applying to law school.

Resume: Your pre-law advisor can also help you draft and format your resume.

ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS

The Winthrop House pre-law team – Dennis Mallinson, the Assistant to the Resident Dean (mallins@fas.harvard.edu) – will help you submit the Letters of Recommendation along with additional forms particular to individual law schools.

When all letters of recommendation are filed, the Resident Dean's Office copies and mails them to LSDAS on your behalf. To accomplish this, you must do the following:

(i) **Complete the Law School Mailing Form.** This is a clear list of all schools to which you have decided to apply, together with the names of recommenders whose letters you wish mailed to each school. Attach to this form any evaluation forms provided and required by the schools. Harvard College applicants provide letters of recommendation to the law schools to which they apply; they do not request their recommenders to complete forms particular to individual law schools.

(ii) **Submit a large (9"x12") addressed and stamped manila envelope for each school with postage.** The envelopes should be addressed to the law schools to which you are applying, and include \$1.10 postage each. *Do not fill out your return address on the envelopes, as the Resident Dean's Office is the proper return address, and we will affix our own label.*

(iii) **Additional Forms:** Some schools also include evaluation forms to be filled out and signed by your Academic Dean (Gregg Peeples, Resident Dean). An example includes a Dean's Certification Form. Attach these forms as described above to the Law School Mailing Form. *Read these forms carefully and do not discard them - they must accompany your letters even if they are not completed.*

(iv) **LSDAS Service:** Make sure to submit your transcript directly to LSDAS.

When you have completed these forms, enclose them in the appropriate stamped and addressed envelopes and bring them to the Resident Dean's Office.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q. How many letters of recommendation should I submit?

A. No more than three; two is often enough. Students are tempted to include more than three letters, but this actually can reflect negatively on applicants and is nearly always redundant. Discuss who will be your strongest two or three recommenders with your pre-law advisor. Even if you collect more than three letters from which to choose, only submit a maximum of three letters to any particular school. Remember to ask for your letters of recommendation early. It is often best to tell a recommender that you are interested in having him or her write a recommendation, and then schedule a time to meet in person so you can provide any desired materials, explain your interest in law, and thank him or her.

Q. Do I really need to finish my personal statement by October?

A. While ultimately your applications are up to you, it is in your best interest to meet this guideline. Many students get stuck over personal statements, yet simply churning out a draft or two and sharing it with your pre-law advisor can do wonders for restoring your confidence. Remember that ultimately there is no "perfect" topic: readers simply want to know that you are an intellectually engaged person who will thrive in the law school environment. As a result, the personal statement can take myriad forms. Utilize the time between taking the LSAT and receiving your score to produce a final draft.

Q. Where can I find the LSDAS Letter of Recommendation waiver forms I'll need to prepare for Dennis to send my recommendation letters on to LSDAS?

A. Log into your LSDAS account; you'll be taken to your account homepage. Scroll to the bottom of the page, and click the link "Letters of Recommendation" under the heading "Credential Assembly Service." You will be taken to the Letter of Recommendation page, which has general instructions for how to prepare this form. At the bottom of this page, click on the link "Add Recommender" which is to the right under the heading "My LORs and Recommenders."

Enter the information for each recommender -- you'll be doing one of these for each letter that is being sent in. "Number of Letters from this recommender" should be ONE (1), unless you are getting multiple letters from a writer who is tailoring each one to a specific school. Under "L3 Letter Description", write "Use for all law schools", unless you are getting tailored letters. (If you are getting tailored letters, instead write "Use for Law School." You will have to Add a New Recommender for each tailored letter -- so if a recommender is writing 4 letters, one each tailored to UPenn, UChicago, Yale and Stanford, for instance, you would Add 4 New Recommenders just for that one writer.)

Click "Submit." This will generate a LOR form that you must print out, sign, and *give to Dennis ASAP*. He cannot send your recommendation letters to LSDAS without this form, and it takes LSDAS a few days to upload your materials once they receive them.

Q. When will the Resident Dean's Office send out my application?

A. As soon as it is complete and the application can be processed. To be complete, the Resident Dean's Office requires that all recommendation letters mentioned in your information form be received. Therefore, if you speculated you might receive six letters of recommendation, all your files will be held until each of the six recommendations is received. If you want to change your expected number of recommendations, update your information form and inform Dennis.

CONCLUSION

In addition to the resources that are available to you at Winthrop House, you should consider visiting the Office of Career Resources, which has several resources that might assist you in your initial research of the law schools to which you may eventually choose to apply. Nicole Satyanarayan, Assistant Director for Law, Government, Politics, Foundations, and Service (nsatya@fas.harvard.edu) has considerable experience assisting Harvard College students. In addition to maintaining a library of publications that discuss all aspects of law school and the application process, OCS publishes an annual list of statistics, known as "the grids," which tracks how Harvard College applicants to the major law schools throughout the country have fared in recent years, noting their GPA, LSAT, concentration, and race. Keep in mind that these grids are only raw data; they do not on their own explain why each applicant fared as he or she did. Furthermore, the data included in the grids is generally over two years old and may not accurately reflect law schools' current admissions standards.

Finally, as you begin the law school application process, be sure that you maintain the focus necessary to achieve your individual potential. Start the process as early as possible, and *stay organized*. This will benefit everyone on the pre-law team, and most importantly, it will benefit *you*. While your individual pre-law advisors will make their best efforts to shepherd you toward the realization of your aspirations, never lose sight of the fact that your persistent efforts on your own behalf will do the most to insure a happy conclusion. While it is a lesson that is difficult to learn, there is nothing that we can do in life to insure our success other than to give our very best. Give your best to this process: your efforts *will* be rewarded!

WHEN QUESTIONS ARISE, PLEASE DO NOT HESITATE TO ASK US.

GOOD LUCK!