
Chapter 3: The Law School Admission Process

■ How Law Schools Determine Whom to Admit

It is very difficult to predict with certainty which individuals will perform well in law school, so admission committees seek the most qualified from the pool of applicants. In order to be fair, schools rely heavily upon selection criteria that bear on expected performance in law school and can be applied objectively to all candidates. Law schools consider a variety of factors in admitting their students, and no single qualification will independently guarantee acceptance or denial. The two factors that all candidates present, prior academic performance and the LSAT score, are fundamental to the admission process.

The most difficult admission decisions are those regarding candidates who are neither so well qualified nor so unsatisfactory as to present a clear-cut case for acceptance or denial. These applicants constitute the majority of the applicant pool at many law schools.

Criteria That May Be Considered by Law School Admission Committees

- Undergraduate grade-point average
- LSAT score
- Undergraduate course of study
- Graduate work, if any
- College attended

■ The Law School Admission Test (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, most Canadian law schools, and many other law schools require applicants to take the LSAT as part of the admission process.

The test consists of five 35-minute sections of multiple-choice questions, in three different item types. Four of the five sections contribute to the test taker's score. The unscored section, commonly referred to as the variable section, typically is used to pretest new test questions or to preequate new test forms. The placement of this section in the LSAT will vary. A 35-minute writing sample is administered at the end of the test. LSAC does not score the writing sample, but copies of the writing sample are sent to all law schools to which you apply.

The score scale for the LSAT is 120 to 180. Some schools place greater weight than others on the LSAT; most law schools do evaluate your full range of credentials.

What the Test Measures

The LSAT is designed to measure skills that are considered essential for success in law school: the reading and comprehension of complex texts with accuracy and insight; the organization and management of information and the ability to draw reasonable inferences from it; the ability to think critically; and the analysis and evaluation of the reasoning and arguments of others.

- Improvement in grades and grade distribution
- College curricular and extracurricular activities
- Ethnic/racial background
- Individual character and personality
- Letters of recommendation
- Writing skills
- Personal statement or essay
- Work experience or other postundergraduate experiences
- Community activities
- Motivation to study and reasons for deciding to study law
- State of residency
- Obstacles that have been overcome
- Past accomplishments and leadership
- Anything else that stands out in an application

The three multiple-choice question types in the LSAT are:

Reading Comprehension Questions

These questions measure the ability to read, with understanding and insight, examples of lengthy and complex materials similar to those commonly encountered in law school. The Reading Comprehension section contains four sets of reading questions, each consisting of a selection of reading material, followed by five to eight questions that test reading and reasoning abilities.

Analytical Reasoning Questions

These questions measure the ability to understand a structure of relationships and to draw logical conclusions about that structure. You are asked to reason deductively from a set of statements and rules or principles that describe relationships among persons, things, or events. Analytical Reasoning questions reflect the kinds of complex analyses that a law student performs in the course of legal problem solving.

Logical Reasoning Questions

These questions assess the ability to analyze, critically evaluate, and complete arguments as they occur in ordinary language. Each Logical Reasoning question requires the test taker to read and comprehend a short passage, then answer a question about it. The questions are designed to assess a wide range of skills involved in thinking critically, with an emphasis on skills that are central to legal reasoning. These skills include

drawing well-supported conclusions, reasoning by analogy, determining how additional evidence affects an argument, applying principles or rules, and identifying argument flaws.

Your Score as a Predictor of Law School Performance

The LSAT, like any admission test, is not a perfect predictor of law school performance. The predictive power of an admission test is limited by many factors, such as the complexity of the skills the test is designed to measure and the unmeasurable factors that can affect students' performances, such as motivation, physical and mental health, or work and family responsibilities. In spite of these factors, the LSAT compares very favorably with admission tests used in other graduate and professional fields of study. Additional information about scoring can be found on the LSAC website, LSAC.org.

Test Preparation

Most law school applicants familiarize themselves with test directions and question types, practice on sample tests, and study the information available on test-taking techniques and strategies. Although it is difficult to say when examinees are sufficiently prepared, very few people achieve their full potential without some preparation.

You should be so familiar with the instructions and question types that nothing you see on the test can delay or distract you from thinking about how to answer a question. At a minimum, you should review the descriptions of the question types on LSAC's website and simulate the day of the test by

taking a practice test that includes a writing sample under actual time constraints. Taking a practice test under timed conditions helps you to estimate the amount of time you can afford to spend on each question in a section and to determine the question types for which you may need additional practice.

LSAC publishes a variety of materials to help you prepare for the LSAT. See the ad toward the back of this book, or visit LSAC's website—www.LSAC.org.

Academic Record

Undergraduate performance is generally an important indicator of how someone is likely to perform in law school. Hence, many law schools look closely at college grades when considering individual applications.

Course selection also can make a difference in admission evaluations. Applicants who have taken difficult or advanced courses in their undergraduate study often are evaluated in a more favorable light than students who have concentrated on easier or less advanced subjects.

Many law schools consider undergraduate-performance trends along with a student's numerical average. Thus, they may discount a slow start in a student's undergraduate career if he or she performs exceptionally well in the later school years. Similarly, admission committees may see an undergraduate's strong start followed by a mediocre finish as an indication of less potential to do well in law school. Candidates are advised to comment on irregular grade trends in their applications.

Grade Conversion Table

LSAC Conversion		Grades as Reported on Transcripts			
4.0 Scale	A to F	1 to 5	100–0*	Four Passing Grades	Three Passing Grades
4.33	A+	1+	98–100	Highest Passing Grade (4.0)	Highest Passing Grade (4.0)
4.00	A	1	93–97		
3.67	A–	1–	90–92		
3.50	AB				
3.33	B+	2+	87–89	Second Highest Passing Grade (3.0)	Middle Passing Grade (3.0)
3.00	B	2	83–86		
2.67	B–	2–	80–82		
2.50	BC				
2.33	C+	3+	77–79	Third Highest Passing Grade (2.0)	Lowest Passing Grade (2.0)
2.00	C	3	73–76		
1.67	C–	3–	70–72		
1.50	CD				
1.33	D+	4+	67–69	Lowest Passing Grade (1.0)	
1.00	D	4	63–66		
0.67	D–	4–	60–62		
0.50	DE or DF				
0.00	E and F	5	Below 60	Failure (0.0)	Failure (0.0)

*In some instances, a school's numeric grading scale might be converted differently than shown here.

■ Additional Admission Decision Factors

Law schools consider more than academic records and LSAT scores when evaluating applicants. Some of the most important factors are discussed below.

Letters of Recommendation

The most effective letters of recommendation are those from professors who have known you well enough to write with candor, detail, and objectivity about your academic and

personal achievements and potential. Work supervisors also can write in support of your application. Letters that compare you to your academic peers are often considered the most useful. Most schools do not consider general, unreservedly praiseworthy letters helpful. Some schools do not require letters at all and may not read letters of recommendation if they receive them.

Work Experience

Law schools want diverse, interesting classes, representative of a variety of backgrounds. A candidate who applies to law school several years after completing his or her undergraduate education, and who has demonstrated an ability to succeed in a nonacademic environment, is sometimes more motivated than one who continues his or her education without a break. In fact, only about one-third of law students enter directly from college.

Your Personal Essay

Each candidate to law school has something of interest to present. Maybe you've had some experience, some training, or some dream that sets you apart from others. Law schools want to recruit men and women who are qualified for reasons beyond grades and scores. The essay or personal statement in your application is the place to tell the committee about yourself.

In general, your evaluation of actual experiences and past accomplishments has more value to the committee than speculation about future accomplishments. Also, if you have overcome a serious obstacle in your life to get where you are today, by all means let the admission committee know about it. Any noteworthy personal experience or accomplishment may be an appropriate subject for your essay; however, be sure to do more than just state it. Describe your experience briefly but concretely, and why it had value to you, whether it is a job, your family, a significant accomplishment, or your upbringing. You are simultaneously trying to add information and create structure. Be brief, be factual, be comprehensive, and be organized. You are a storyteller here. You want a living person—you—to emerge. The statement is your opportunity to become vivid and alive to the reader, and it is an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to write and present a prose sample in a professional manner.

Graduate or Professional Study

Prior success or failure in other graduate or professional school work, including other law schools, may also be a factor in the admission committee's decision. In any case, you are required to report such work to any law school to which you apply.

Minority Applicants

Ethnic diversity is essential to the study of law, and greatly benefits the law class, the law school, and the legal profession. All law schools actively seek students who are members of minority groups and strongly encourage minority applicants. (See chapter 6 for further details on minority recruitment and enrollment.)

International Applicants

Students from other countries are enrolled at US law schools, most frequently in graduate programs (usually called LLM programs) that are designed to meet the needs of people who already hold a recognized law degree from another country but want to learn about the legal system of the United States.

■ Assessing Yourself Realistically

When selecting law schools to which you will apply, the general philosophy is that you should have a threefold plan: dream a little, be realistic, and be safe. Most applicants have no trouble selecting dream schools—those that are almost, but not quite,

Procedures and requirements for international applicants for the JD or LLM programs vary from school to school. You should contact the individual schools that interest you to learn about each school's particular requirements. Most schools will ask applicants for whom English is not their native language to take a standardized test such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of Written English (TWE). Each school sets its own standard for required minimal scores on the tests.

Many schools require applicants educated outside the US, its territories, and Canada to use either LSAC's credential assembly service or another evaluation service to authenticate and evaluate a student's grades and degrees for US admission committees. The student is responsible for the cost of this service, and some law schools will require you to use a specific service.

For candidates applying to JD or post-JD programs (LLM, SJD, and other similar degrees), LSAC offers a credential assembly service that collects, authenticates, evaluates, and distributes all transcripts and TOEFL scores to each law school where the applicant submits an application. Most law schools subscribe to this service, but candidates should check with individual schools before registering. Detailed information about the service is available at www.LSAC.org.

International students must also demonstrate the ability to pay for schooling in this country in order to apply for a student visa (F-1 form). You may be asked to complete a certification of finances form from the law school; if the school is satisfied that the student can pay, it will issue a form (I-20) to submit to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) as part of your application for a student visa. Because of the time required to process entry visas, international applicants are encouraged to apply for admission as early in the process as possible.

International students may be eligible for institutional grants and loans, but are ineligible for federal loans, and (in most schools) are required to have a US cosigner for private loans. Contact the financial aid office at the schools to which you are applying for more details.

Interviews

In general, interviews are not a part of the law school admission process. You are encouraged to visit law schools to gather information, and often an appointment with admission personnel will be a part of the visit. The purpose of your conversation with the admission staff usually will be informational rather than evaluative and will not become a part of your admission file. An occasional school will grant an interview, and some may even request it, but, in general, you should not count on an interview as a means to state your case for admission; this is best done in the personal statement.

beyond their grasp—or safe schools—those for which admission is virtually certain. A common strategic error made by applicants is failure to evaluate realistically their chances for admission to a particular law school. The admission data and law

school admission profile grids in this book and online at www.LSAC.org are helpful sources, because the data are provided by the law schools directly to the ABA and LSAC.

Use the Admission Profile Grids in This Book

Check your qualifications against the admission profiles of the law schools that interest you. Most schools publish a grid that indicates the number of applicants with LSAT scores and GPAs like yours who were admitted in the most recent admission year. This gives you a general sense of your competitiveness at that school. These charts will help you determine which schools are your dream schools, your realistic schools, and your safe schools. If your profile meets or exceeds that of a school, it is likely that that school will be as interested in admitting you as you are in being admitted. Other statistics are contained in the school's ABA data, so that material should be read with care as well. A few words of caution: First, law schools consider many other factors beyond the LSAT score and GPA, as described in the previous section ("Additional Admission Decision Factors"), and the grids and data about these credentials only give you part of the story. Second, you should make your final decision about where you will apply only after obtaining additional information from each school. Third, the data in the grids are from a previous application year and may not reflect fluctuations in applicant volume that affect admission decisions.

Research Specific Law Schools That Interest You

Other sources of information include:

- **The school's admission office.** This is a good source for general information about the school and your chances for admission. Do not hesitate to request admission counseling. Be sure to obtain current catalogs and visit the websites for each law school you are considering.
- **Your college or university prelaw advisor.** LSAC provides the name of a prelaw advisor at your degree-granting institution. Your prelaw advisor can often provide you with reliable information about which law schools fit your personal profile. He or she may also be able to tell you which law schools have accepted students from your school in the past and provide you with an overview of the admitted students' credentials. This will help you to determine how law schools have treated applicants from your school in the recent past.
- **Law School Forums.** The Law School Forums, organized by the Law School Admission Council, are excellent opportunities to talk personally with law school representatives from around the country in one central, urban location—usually

a hotel exhibit hall. Recent forums have been held in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York City, San Francisco Bay Area, and Washington, DC. In 2009, 192 ABA-approved law schools participated in the forums, and over 13,500 people registered as attendees. Because traveling to a number of law schools can be expensive, many prospective law students find the forums to be the most productive means of gathering information and making school contacts. Forum admission is free; for dates and locations of 2010 Law School Forums, see the ad toward the back of this book, or visit LSAC's website—LSAC.org. Forum preregistration is also available on the LSAC website.

- **School representatives and alumni.** Take advantage of opportunities to talk with law school representatives and alumni. When you talk with alumni, remember that law schools sometimes change fairly quickly. Try to talk to a recent graduate or to one who is active in alumni affairs and therefore knowledgeable about the school as it is today.
- **School visits.** Law schools encourage you to visit. You can learn a great deal about a school from talks with students and faculty members. Many law schools have formal programs in which a currently enrolled student will take you on a tour of the campus and answer your questions. Such a firsthand experience can be quite valuable in assessing how you would fit into the school.
- **The Internet.** The websites of LSAC (LSAC.org) and the ABA (www.abanet.org/legaled) provide links to the websites of ABA-approved law schools. The various avenues of online social networking are likely to provide many opportunities to link up, electronically at least, with students at law schools you are considering. Do keep in mind that a school may be a right (or wrong) fit for one person but not another. As is always true in online relationships, it's best to keep an open mind when it comes to comments from people you have never met in person. There is no substitution for seeing and experiencing a school for yourself.

Keep Your Options Open

Flexibility is a key word in the law school admission process. Keep your options open. Even during the early stages of the admission process, you should continually reevaluate your prospects and prepare alternative plans. For example, don't set your sights on only one law school and one plan of action. You could severely limit your potential and your chance to practice law.