

## TACKLING YOUR LAW PERSONAL STATEMENT

### What is a personal statement?

Your personal statement is your only chance to tell us, before you come to your interview, why you want to study law at Cambridge.

The answer is not obvious. Many excellent barristers and solicitors did not study law at University. It is demanding in terms of workload, and for most students, not a subject you have studied before. Why, then, would you drop all your favourite subjects from school to study law for the first time?

Many never seem to know the answer. But, if you offer a good reason for studying law in your personal statement, we might decide to discuss it at interview. This means that your personal statement represents an opportunity to shape your Cambridge interview. By all means then, “feed” us potential sources of questions through your personal statement.

### Why do you want to study Law?

What reasons might you offer for pursuing a Law degree? Think about your motivations seriously, and imagine us being just a bit quizzical when we read them. You say that your family of lawyers inspired you? I might ask, “So, if your parents were instead successful fraudsters, would you have followed them in that?”

We might also wonder why spending two weeks at a law firm would inspire you to *study* law at the depth required in a degree course at Cambridge. (It would almost put me off studying law. In fact, it almost *did*).

What *might* persuade us, then?

You might have read books on studying law, preferably those which give glimpses into several different strands of law. This is a good start, but it is only a start. Everyone claims to have read books about law, so this is not very distinctive by itself. Besides, we are less interested in what you have read, and more interested in what you thought about it.

So, has something that you read sparked your interest in a legal question? Does something you notice motivate you to research legal issues by yourself? There are plenty of free and accessible resources, from books to online blogs on all areas of the law, that can help you pursue your interests.

### How can you demonstrate your interest in Law?

Let’s take a look at some examples of ways you might follow up your legal interests.

Perhaps some newspaper article or an item on social media caught your attention. You may have read recently about some travelers at airports continually being stopped and questioned, in some cases on dozens of occasions, for up to six hours in the worst cases, merely because their name resembles someone else on a list of suspect persons, even though they are clearly not the person of interest. Protests to the Home Office go unheard. Is there really nothing these travelers can do about this continuous, quite negligent harassment, you might have wondered?

After locating Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, you may begin to see the legal problem. You might find a blog which discusses the decision of the Supreme Court in *Beghal v DPP*, where it is

decided that the wide powers at airports are compatible with human rights law. You might read the decision itself – many important cases, including this one, may be read freely via [www.bailii.org](http://www.bailii.org).

You might also discover that Ms Beghal later took the United Kingdom to the First section of the European Court of Human Rights, and earlier this year, she won! What are the potential implications of *that* for the legality of the stop and question power?

Or, you might be aware of the small proportion of women in the higher echelons in the judiciary – what are the various reasons for that? Does it happen in other European countries? Might it be relevant that our judges are mostly only selected from practitioners when they have reached middle age?

Or maybe your interest was piqued by some legal difficulty which befell your family. That alone gets you nowhere; but again, if this experience caused you to research the relevant law in some depth, and thus to discover the challenges of legal research, that might be different.

For instance, suppose that your parents parked in a private car park and that the company running it tried to charge them £50 for overstaying the permitted time by one minute – having tracked down their address through the DVLA. Perhaps you got curious; can they really do this? Then you might have looked up the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 and the leading Supreme Court case of *Parking Eye v Beavis*, and you may have found various blogs where suggestions – both legal and practical - are made about evading liability in such cases.

Any student interested in law in should find something in contemporary affairs which prompt him or her to ask, “Why is that, then? What can be done?”

Researching such questions yourself might not be so easy. It can be hard to know where to start and how to proceed. This is exactly why you might find this exercise useful; it’s great practice in legal research for you, and for us, it helps to show that you have the necessary skills, interests, and motivation.

Bear in mind too that in some cases, your question might not have a simple answer. This doesn’t mean that you have failed in your research. In fact, it may mean that you have chosen a particularly good area for research. The law *is* complicated, and many issues have no clear solution – rather, just a range of possible solutions from which a higher court has yet to choose. In your exams you will often be asked specifically for your interpretations or views on points which are far from clear.

### **How can you get started on your personal statement?**

I suggest that the first thing you might do is to write a draft of 500 words of more on why you want to study law. What legal questions interest you most? How have you pursued your interests? What are you excited to pursue further? Then work and rework it.

Show your statement to your referee too, if you can; and make sure that he or she has a list of your achievements and personal qualities or experiences which may help your application. They are not obliged to pass it all on, but normally they would, if they feel properly able to do so.

### **What about the SAQ optional additional personal statement?**

Finally, for my part I regard completing a “supplementary personal statement” as purely optional. It is partly there because there are some courses at Cambridge that cannot be studied elsewhere, and so candidates will probably not have addressed their motivations fully in their UCAS application form. But your motivation for studying law should be the same when applying to every University.

There is nothing to be gained from assuring us that we would be your top choice, if offered a place. Similarly, going out of your way to compliment your chosen College, or its Law Fellows, will be most unlikely to gain you any advantage (we have heard it all before). So, really - you probably can leave it blank.

The bottom line is this: everyone is considered on their merits and when excellent candidates come along, no college turns them down on the basis of their supplementary statement, or lack of one.

Good luck!

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