

Prelaw FAQ:

**Questions and Answers for Those Considering Law School
(revised 8/11)**

Professor Tim Hagle (timothy-hagle@uiowa.edu)
Prelaw Advisor, Department of Political Science
The University of Iowa
www.uiowa.edu/~030116

I am often asked about preparing for or attending law school. Not surprisingly, many students have similar questions, so I have prepared this FAQ of questions and answers for those considering law school. What follows are some of the most common questions I am asked and the answers I would give if you asked me these questions in person. The material below covers a wide range of topics, not all of which may concern you right now. The material is intended to answer questions that may arise from your first through your last semester as an undergraduate, and possibly beyond. Please keep in mind that these are the general answers and advice I would give. Another person may very well give you different answers or advice (and you should talk to others to get as much information as possible). In addition, the general advice here may not suit your particular situation or interests. If so, be sure to talk to me or others about your particular situation. The bottom line is that you must take responsibility for making your own decisions. I can only offer the observations of someone who has been through the process (but, of course, I have also dealt with these issues on a regular basis as an advisor for many years).

Why do you want to go to law school?

This first question is one I am asking you. Note that I did not ask why you want to be a lawyer. There are many reasons for wanting to go to law school, some are better than others, but it depends on your own situation. For me, it was a way to avoid getting a job for another three years. Well, that was not the only reason, but with degrees in math and communications my options were pretty much limited to the military or teaching high school. Neither of these appealed to me at the time, despite the fact I had earned a high school teaching certificate. I had always been interested in law and politics, so law school seemed like a good idea.

Most prelaw students want to be lawyers. Nevertheless, many of you may have serious misconceptions about what it is like to be a lawyer. Most of the jobs are not the big money and glamour positions we see on television. Only the very top students will get the big money starting positions. Even for those who do get good positions, the work load is enormous. It is common for new associates (beginning lawyers in a firm) to easily put in 60 to 80 hours a week. This may not seem so bad if your work is interesting. Unfortunately, the work is often tedious and boring. I have heard personal accounts telling of young attorneys who make good money but are unhappy and dissatisfied because they have no time to enjoy their earnings.

A friend of mine who was an Iowa attorney suggested that students interested in becoming attorneys actively find out what it is that attorneys do on a daily basis. If you know someone who is an attorney (relative, family friend, or even your family's attorney) ask if you can spend a day in his or her office. Even if you manage to arrange such a visit, one day may not give you an accurate picture of what goes on in a law office, particularly because the attorney or office staff may try to spice things up for you. It might be better if you can arrange a prelaw summer clerkship. This is a fancy way of saying you will do "gofer" work for free for the opportunity to hang around the office for a summer. (Résumé note: Think of creative ways to describe jobs and experience you have had. "Prelaw Summer Clerk" sounds much better than "the kid who ran the copier last summer.") Even though you are not getting paid (but it is great if you do!), the experience is well worth it. Such experience will help you determine whether you really want to be an attorney. If you do, you can enter law school with a better understanding of what lawyers do.

In addition to asking yourself why you want to go to law school, you must also ask yourself if you are willing to put in the hard work and make the sacrifices necessary to do well. In this regard, let me relate two things I was told during my first day of orientation at law school. First, we were told that this small university (University of Puget Sound) had two psychologists on staff: one for the law students and one for the rest of the university. The point being, there is a great deal of stress involved in law school. Stress is not necessarily bad, *if* you can channel it in a positive manner, but many law students have trouble doing so. Second, one of the speakers told us that many of the married students would not be married by the time they graduated, or at least not to the same person. Again, the point was stress, which can be very damaging to a relationship. I am not trying to scare you by telling you these things. Rather, I am concerned that you know what to expect when you enter law school. If you know what to expect, you will be better able to prepare yourself for what is to come.

There are several books available that try to prepare students for the law school environment. These range from those that approach the subject like this handout, to personal accounts of the law school experience. Of the latter type, *One L* by Scott Turow has been a bestseller for years. It chronicles his experiences during his first year at Harvard Law School. (Scott Turow is a practicing attorney and author several novels including *Presumed Innocent*.) A lighter approach to describing the first year of law school can be found in *Lawyer Boy* by Rick Lax. Lax attended

DePaul University College of Law. Such books might give you a better idea of what to expect during law school. Keep in mind that law school experiences differ widely. Nevertheless, such books may give you some insight and perhaps allow you to ask better questions regarding the kind of law school you want to attend. Of the "how to" books, Paul Lermack's *How to Get Into the Right Law School* is a comprehensive look at the entire process. I agree with most of what Lermack has to say and he covers the same topics as this FAQ, but does so in greater detail than I can here. (Lermack's book has sometimes been out of print, but you might be able to pick up used copies via the internet. The same will be true for any of the other books I will mention in this FAQ.)

Do I really want to be a lawyer?

That is your decision—and make sure that it is *your* decision. Do not let others pressure you to go to law school just because some other member of the family is a lawyer or "it is the thing to do." There is always room for well-trained, highly-skilled, and dedicated attorneys. To be a top attorney, however, requires a great deal of hard work and commitment, both in law school and later on the job. Knowing in advance what will be required of you, both in law school and later in the profession, may save you a lot of time and money in the long run.

Your decision may be easier if you have some idea of what kind of lawyer you want to be. (Not everyone who goes to law school wants to be a lawyer. I will discuss this more later.) You should be aware of the many different types of lawyers that exist. Lawyers can work for the government in several capacities (e.g., FBI, federal attorneys, public defenders, prosecutors, military, for agencies, for legislators). Lawyers in the private sector also come in many forms (e.g., solo practice, in a firm, corporate counsel, real estate, tax, and numerous other specialties). In large firms beginning attorneys may devote their time to research and have little client contact for years. If you are interested in client contact, a large firm may not be for you. This is the type of information you need to consider. Having a better idea of your interests will help you decide if you really want to go to law school and if so, which school might be best for you.

My friend also suggested that I tell students to prepare themselves for the psychological burden of being an attorney. Let me quote from his letter:

[This] requires the students to understand what an attorney relies on for business. That business generally is the problems of others. When your business is assisting people who have problems, you in turn accept those problems as your problem. Simply put, an attorney is placed in the middle of an emotional focal point in a person's life. This psychological burden multiplied by the 75 or 125 client caseload that an attorney generally carries, can be extremely stressful to one's life. If the student is not prepared to deal with people on this level of interaction, they should think long and hard about this profession. There are very few attorneys who can avoid this sort of practice, only patent and a few security transaction attorneys avoid this type of client interaction.

Some time ago I was contacted by a former attorney who had recently taken an academic advising position at the University of North Carolina. After sharing information about my approach to prelaw advising, I asked her why she had left the legal profession. She sent me a very thoughtful reply. Although her comments are a bit long, I believe they are worth reading in their entirety (with slight editing on my part).

To begin my thoughts, I am forwarding you a copy of part of an email a friend who is a government attorney sent to me regarding dissatisfaction with the profession of law. The piece expresses several points regarding problems with the practice of law that I hold (and my friend obviously shares):

I can't resist sending you the following: This was written by the Director of the Friends Program and Assistant Dir of PALS of the NC Bar. After reading this don't you think you made the right decision?

"The stressful nature of the legal profession and the perception by lawyers of how they are viewed by the general public combine to place lawyers at great risk for stress which, many times, leads to depression and/or other mental disorders. There is a perception that a lawyer must be seen as tough, individualistic, unafraid, in control, aggressive, etc; nobody ever says they want a nice lawyer. Unlike most professions, it is often necessary for someone to lose in order for a lawyer to help his client. It can require a great deal of time for a case to be tried and the longer the period from the time one initiates action until a result is achieved, the greater the build up of tension; individuals need positive feedback at reasonable intervals. A lawyer has to be hypersensitive to confidentiality concerns which can serve to isolate.

Additionally, a lawyer's environment is quite often adversarial. Perhaps the most stress [??] court calendars are changed, vacations are put off or canceled, etc. Also if a lawyer is successful, there is virtually no limit to the amount of work he can command; and since lawyers are achievers by nature, they can experience guilt feelings when they are not working, which limits their ability to relax and pursue appropriate leisure time activities. A lawyer's work is susceptible to constant scrutiny and the opposition is always trying to outmaneuver or prove the lawyer wrong; professional courtesy is pretty much a thing of the past. Lawyers are trained to notice and anticipate the negative."

(After reading this, what person, with a brain, would choose to go into law!!) Bully to you for having guts.

This piece captures some of my biggest problems with the practice of law. I am by nature a very helpful and nurturing individual. There are almost no competitive bones in my body. I tend to give others more credit than they are due. These traits are the opposite of traits that are needed in the practice of law – at least as I observed it practiced at 3 different firms.

For a little background, I decided in high school that I wanted to be a lawyer. My ideas of what lawyers did were wholly shaped by the movies and TV shows available then (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Perry Mason*, *Owen Marshall*, etc.) There were no attorneys in the family. In fact, neither of my parents had a college degree. Both were victims of the depression and had to work to try to support themselves and their families. I majored in English and Political Science, made Phi Beta Kappa by my Junior year, and trotted off to law school immediately after college. This was a mistake. I absolutely loved my English courses, and did not particularly like my two Political Science courses I took that were law related. In fact, I spoke to my honors seminar professor about graduate school in English, and he encouraged me to do it, but only if I were willing to take poverty vows. I graduated in 1979 – evidently a peak year for the English Ph.D. glut. I decided that bright women from families of modest means did not go into debt to get a degree that would not guarantee them a decent paying job.

I started law school, but thought I could continue to work as I had during my undergraduate years and keep up a very active social schedule. Pretty soon I was far behind, and then I was the victim of an armed robbery at work. With all the stress and my ambivalent feelings, I decided to drop out of law school. I moved to DC and worked a few years, returned to UNC and received a Master's in Teaching English, and taught English in public schools for several years. At this point, I decided to return to law school – I figured if I were going to work 60 hour weeks, I might as well be professionally rewarded for it.

My second attempt at law school went better. I was more mature and focused, and ended up in the top 10% of my class at the end of first year. UNC was higher ranked then than it is now, and I received offers from 3 top DC firms. I chose to work for one because I liked the attorneys I had worked with over a summer there, and they were ranked among the top 5 national firms for corporate litigation at the time.

Off I went to DC to earn obscene amounts of money and travel all over the US. As someone who had struggled to make ends meet my entire life, I enjoyed the money and the expense account travel, but pretty soon, the long hours and meaninglessness of my work bothered me. Essentially, I was helping one major corporation sue another major corporation, and with the exception of a major antitrust case I worked on, I felt there was very little benefit to society. In fact, the law firms seemed to be the sole beneficiary of 90% of the litigation I worked on. And yes – the long hours – began to get old. I tell some of my prelaw advisees that I literally worked all night on numerous occasions, and they don't believe me. Several times I had partners enter my office at 6pm and tell me they needed something done by the next morning – never mind that the task was a 10 or 12 hour task. I have had to miss social events I was hosting, planned family vacations, and other events. Perhaps the most alarming example happened when I received a call from a senior associate on a Friday afternoon just before I was getting ready to make the 7 hour drive to my parents home for a holiday weekend – I wanted to be there because my mom was getting the results of a cancer biopsy back that day. The associate dumped something he hadn't done on me that was due Tuesday. I explained my situation, and his reply was "Oh well, you can come back early and do it." The assignment was a brief that would take all weekend for me to do and he knew it. I started work on it and called home. Because of that inconsiderate guy, my mom had to tell me over the phone that she had inoperable cancer and had three months to live. Needless to say, I called the partner on the case and went home to be with my family. The senior associate never even apologized or mentioned it. This is not an extreme example. Many attorneys in these firms have

zero empathy or social skills. By the way, two young associates died during my years at this firm. One from a heart attack, and one from insulin shock. There was speculation that the insulin shock victim forgot to take her medication or didn't take it on purpose because she was so overworked and miserable at the time.

I did work with some bright and decent attorneys at the firm and even had some enjoyable experiences. I remained there five years. Most of the associates I liked had left by then. Primarily the super competitive, win at all costs associates were left, and I didn't want to be a part of that. I saw one close friend stabbed in the back by another associate and later heard horror stories from another. I was lucky to be successful there, but I just did not wish to spend my life in that environment. I decided to move back to NC and work for an education law firm. (I spent only a little over a year at the first NC firm because the partner I worked for was unethical. I moved to the firm he had been asked to leave once I found out how he chose to practice law. I had to ask a mentor whether I was obligated to report something he did to the state bar. We decided I didn't have to report that, but I knew it was only a matter of time before something I was obligated to report popped up!) I enjoyed the subject matter more, but many of the problems were the same. The stress, the long hours, the adversarial mode were all present. There were great intellectual challenges and variety that I enjoyed, but I decided that I did not love "the law" enough to spend the remainder of my vital years in the profession. I actually have time to spend with family and on interests outside the law now. I truly appreciate that. I guess I can say that the law was not a good fit with my interests and personality. Even after all that is said, I'm not sure that I regret having gone to law school and practiced law. I do not discourage students who are truly interested in law from pursuing it. Some people find a niche and enjoy themselves, but this is not a high number. When I looked at the partners around me, I would classify very few of them as happy and content people. Many were downright miserable. Many of my friends moan and complain about law practice, but they are too attracted to the money to give it up. I'm making less than 1/2 what I made as an attorney, and I must say that the golden handcuffs are hard to loosen. I have been asked to return to law practice twice now. Once I considered it. I can't say right now whether I will return or not, but I doubt it.

Let me mention one other thing that bothered me about law practice. The longer I practiced, the less I believed in the law. I saw it put to many bad uses. Plaintiffs without valid claims were able to shake down school boards because of the sheer nuisance and expense of defending these claims. I've seen the law twisted to fit various positions, and I've seen several cases where the result was determined by the money and or the contacts a particular person had. There are many problems with the system, and I didn't feel like fighting them at this particular point in my life.

Sometimes I have the opportunity to ask my former students who have gone on to law school and a legal career for advice they would give my current prelaw students. One former student took the time to read this FAQ and replied to specific questions. Below is what he said regarding this question and the first one.

These are important questions I think many people truly fail to consider before going to law school (or alternatively consider without much true self examination). While one's reasons for attending law school may change over time, they are what get you through the tough and stressful times. (That and some life balance and fun.) The people I went to law school with that were truly unhappy or dropped out tended to be the people that had no reason why they were going to law school or it was a reason such as to make money or to put off the real world. That said, that reason can change overtime. When I first applied to law school, I had the object to become a prosecutor and bring justice to society. Then shortly before I went to law school, it was to help advance my future of working in politics. Shortly after starting law school, I had decided I was happier without politics as a major aspect of my life and my reason shifted again. Then I realized I loved arguing and the strategy behind litigation and being able to devote my life to that became the priority. Further, going through law school for the wrong reasons and then realizing it a year in or after graduation can be a waste of three years of hard work and a lot of money. For example, a good friend of mine both in undergrad and law school had always seen law school his future, partially due to family pressures and partly due to idolization of his father, who was an attorney. He went to law school and was quite successful. He went on to graduate but now has decided he would rather be a doctor and practice medicine rather than law. He had enough knowledge and access to the legal world before he went to law school, if he had taken a close look at himself and the profession he could have made that determination seven years earlier and have better used those years to reach where he ultimately wants to be. That being said, I also have friends that came to law school because they did not want to have to find a job or knew they wanted to go to graduate

school but were unsure of what area of study and randomly choose law and were successful. But I think they are the exception rather than the rule.

Why go to law school if being a lawyer can be so unrewarding?

The comments above do not paint a very pretty picture of the legal profession. Keep in mind, however, that being a lawyer is not unrewarding for everyone. (If it were, there would be far fewer lawyers!) Still, you should know what you are getting into. Also, just because you might not want to practice law does not mean law school is a waste of time. As I said above, it does keep you from having to get a job for three years. Seriously though, law school can be an extension of your liberal arts education. In law school you do not just learn "The Law," even if such a thing existed. You will also learn a great deal about a variety of subjects such as business, taxes, legal procedures, how to read legislation, how to solve problems, how to avoid problems, and much more. This knowledge can often be quite useful in a variety of situations beyond the practice of law.

Having a law degree will often make you more employable, even in nonlegal jobs. In addition to the obvious material you know, it shows an employer that you have the ability, drive, and determination to get ahead.

Law degrees are very useful if you are interested in politics. Knowing how to read, understand, and draft legislation and regulations are very important skills for those involved in politics. Many upper level politicians and political staff members have been to law school.

Finally, instead of law school, you might consider graduate school in political science or a related field. Salaries have been on the rise of late and are competitive with beginning attorneys' salaries. Some books have shown that the median beginning salary of UI Law School graduates is actually below the average beginning salary for Assistant Professors in the Big Ten. (Even so, the range for starting attorneys is much bigger because large firms hiring top law students will be able to pay much more than universities for beginning salaries.) Some have projected that in the next few years there will be a shortage of faculty at universities because of the large number of faculty members who are reaching retirement age and increasing student enrollments. For women and minority students this may be a particularly attractive option. The number of women and minority academics in many fields is quite low, possibly because as opportunities appear they are choosing fields such as law and medicine. This means universities must be increasingly competitive when it comes to recruiting women and minority faculty members.

Two other books that detail the experiences of lawyers and law students are *The Lure of the Law* by Richard Moll and *My First Year as a Lawyer* edited by Mark Simenhoff. These will provide you with additional perspectives on what it is like to be a lawyer.

So much for the preliminaries, now let us turn to a few more practical questions and answers.

Can I declare prelaw as my major?

Not at the University of Iowa. You can indicate a preference for prelaw when you start school, but you must eventually declare a substantive major as well. All freshmen are initially advised through the Undergraduate Advising Center. Several of the UAC advisors handle students who have indicated a prelaw preference. Students must declare a major after their first year and their advising is then handled through the department of their major. Few departments have someone who specializes in prelaw students, so those interested in law school may need to seek additional help.

Other universities may offer a prelaw major. Even for those that do not, some may offer a prelaw track within a particular major. For example, the Political Science department here at the UI has an "Emphasis Area" program for students who concentrate their coursework in a particular subject area, and Law and Politics is one of the areas of emphasis. Students earning a minor in Political Science may also complete an area of emphasis. Students may complete more than one area of emphasis, and all completed areas are indicated on their transcripts.

I must admit that I have mixed feelings about declaring prelaw as a major or minor, when available, or an emphasis area. On the plus side, if you are taking several prelaw courses you probably should get credit for them in a more structured way. This also gives your program a more planned and ordered appearance to those looking at your transcript. On the minus side there are three things you might consider. First, law schools generally do not care if

you were prelaw. They want you to be prepared, of course, but they often like students from a variety of majors. Second, if you change your mind about going to law school you may be less prepared to enter the job market. (Though it is certainly true that many majors are not designed to specifically prepare you for a career—I will not pick on anyone’s major by naming names!) Third, and related to the second point, it may also be harder to get a job when you have to explain to interviewers why you did not go to law school after getting a prelaw major.

One of my former students offered the following comments on being prelaw. (Some of the comments get more into what courses to take, so remember them for later.)

As to the prelaw path, I think taking course in these areas is extremely beneficial and the benefits far out weight the costs. First, I would caution that not all legal classes or paths in undergrad create great benefits. I took a class that will remain unnamed (not one of your classes) that while giving a layman’s knowledge of the law provided no assistance in law school or the legal profession. However, courses that are more intense and taught like a law school class (Socratic method, reading actual case law, etc.) are extremely beneficial. First, they provide a person with one of the best opportunities to determine if law school is a good fit for you. Second, much of your first year of law school is struggling to be able to read, understand, digest, and apply case law and statutes. The head start I had from taking well-taught, undergrad classes requiring me to read case law provided me with an incalculable advantage my first year of law school. While you point out some negatives, these are minor. (I write from the prospective of an Iowa grad that did not have pre-law as a major option. I could see some major downfalls to this and write about emphasis areas within majors.) While [prelaw] classes may put a fear in non-legal employers that you intend to return to law school, these fears can be overcome if you have a good reason for choosing not to pursue that path (moreover, I am doubtful most prospective employers look closely enough at one’s transcript to notice things such as emphasis areas if they are not noted on a resume). As to delaying prospective training and classes in other fields this is true, but this may be time that needs to be spent to determine if the law is the right choice for you rather than another path.

Do I need to be a prelaw student if I want to go to law school?

No. I did not decide to go to law school until after I saw my LSAT scores and started my senior year. Being prelaw may give you the opportunity to talk with an advisor who knows something about going to law school (like me) and give you a chance to meet other like-minded people, but it is certainly not necessary. Declaring yourself prelaw may also get your name on mailing lists for events and information that may be of interest to potential law students. You may or may not find these materials and events worthwhile. Phi Alpha Delta Law Fraternity has an undergraduate chapter at the UI. I’ve lost touch with the group, but in the past it sponsored activities of interest to those planning on law school (e.g., practice LSAT tests, guest speakers, and forums). You can find out more about this group if you call either the information desk at the Campus Information Center (335-3055) or the Office of Student Life (335-3059).

What major should I declare?

Pick something that interests you, but do not feel you have to choose a major right away. You may want to experiment with classes from several departments before deciding (in fact you should—even after declaring a major). Many prelaw students choose political science as their major. Other common choices are history, psychology, and business. There is no best major, but there are some rules of thumb you should follow. First, pick something interesting to you. Do not declare a major because you think you need it to get into law school. If you do not enjoy the area, your grades will probably suffer and, as a result, it will be more difficult to get into the law school you desire. Second, consider choosing something that will be useful to you if you do not go to law school. You may want to be a lawyer now, but you may change your mind after four years of undergraduate study, you may start law school but not finish, or you may decide to take some time off after graduating before starting law school. Given these possibilities, you should try to get a degree that will help you get a job, just in case you do not go to or finish law school, or if you decide you do not want to practice law as a career. (See the next question.)

One of my former students echoed my comments with these of his own:

Here you state that you do not need to be a pre-law major or political science major (a common misconception I have been asked many times both when I was in and since I have graduated from law school). I would encourage people to choose a major that they find interesting and is challenging. I think this has multiple advantages.

- You are going to perform better in undergraduate classes if you are studying in an area you find interesting and challenging. For me, this happened to be political science and history. But of the top ten percent of my law school class I can also think of a Chemistry/Biology major, a master's degree in the classics, engineers, and a few political science majors off the top of my head.
- Having a degree in a unique area may make you more marketable in the job market. For example, people with hard science or engineering degrees and law degrees are rare but there is a large demand for patent lawyers with both technical and legal expertise.
- If you decide not to go to law school, you have a secondary career path already laid out for yourself.

What courses should I take?

It may not be much of a surprise that I get asked this question *a lot*. Aside from recommending my own courses, I tend to not specify particular courses that prelaw folks should take. This is partly because the value of a particular course will depend on a particular student's overall goals, academic plan and program, and so on. Instead of recommending specific courses, most of the response below concerns general things to consider when choosing courses. With these things in mind, you should also talk to others who have had particular courses. You might not agree with another student's overall assessment of a course, but it might give you some additional information on which to base your decision whether to take the course.

For the first few semesters try to satisfy your General Education requirements (GEs). You do not want to begin your last semester and have GEs left to complete. Of course, this advice is of little help when all these courses are closed. If this is the case, next try to fulfill requirements for your major (if you have declared a major). Within your major, take required introductory courses first. Again, you do not want to be in your last semester and have several required intro courses left. Aside from the possibility that the courses you need are not offered, you do not need the extra pressure to meet your department's requirements at the last minute. In addition, when you are a senior you may be bored with courses that are intended for freshmen and sophomores, and you may not do as well as a result. Finally, select classes that are interesting to you. If you find the material interesting, you will probably do better and learn more.

Whether you are selecting electives or upper division courses in your major, try to select courses that develop or increase your analytic, reasoning, and communication (oral and writing) skills. A very large part of both law school and the legal profession involves reading and writing (especially writing!). The more able you are to understand what you read and to accurately and effectively communicate your thoughts, the better you will do. (Plus, the LSAT tests on reading comprehension—see below.) Consider courses in philosophy, logic, math, economics, business, history, and political science for analysis and reasoning, as well as writing. English, communications, and rhetoric classes will help with writing. Communications and theatre classes will help with oral communication skills.

No courses are absolutely required, but there are a few that you should seriously consider if you plan on law school: 30:153, the Judicial Process, 30:158, the Criminal Justice System, and 30:116, American Constitutional Law and Politics. It should come as no surprise that I teach these three courses. The first two of these courses will introduce you to some legal terminology and the structure of the American judicial system. You can wait to learn the terminology in law school, but knowing it in advance will smooth the transition. The same can be said for 30:116. This class (at least when I teach it) uses a version of the case method (also known as the Socratic method) that is used in most law schools. You will learn how to read an opinion by a court. This goes well beyond merely knowing what the court said. You need to be able to understand the *implications* of what is said as well; not an easy task. Other classes that use a casebook (a book containing edited court opinions) will also be useful.

Let me make a brief aside on when to take these courses. As I teach them, I see 30:153 and 30:158 as sophomore/junior level courses with 30:153 being a bit easier. 30:116 is a more difficult course and it would probably be helpful if one took 30:153 or 30:158 first. I know that many students wait until their senior year to take 30:116 because of its difficulty. My recommendation, however, is to try to take it in your junior year. The reason is that if you take it in the fall of your junior year (I only teach 30:116 in the fall), you might be able to sign up for my spring research course, 30:106. In 30:106 I teach students how to use the law library and work on a court-related database. One can, of course, take these courses senior year, but by taking them in one's junior year, I can write

more detailed letters of recommendation when students apply to law schools their senior year. The combination of these courses allows me to specifically comment on your abilities and work habits in a way that is more informative to law school admission committees. In addition, having taken the research course junior year allows for the possibility of doing advanced work on it in one's senior year. The feedback I have received from students suggests that these courses are quite helpful in preparing for law school. (You can find more information on all my courses at www.uiowa.edu/~030116.)

Business classes may be very helpful. A great deal of legal activity occurs in business. Classes in economics and accounting will introduce you to the terminology used in business and business law (e.g., bill of lading, secured transaction, implied warranty) and help you to understand the process of business transactions. These classes will also make you more marketable if you go into business rather than law (either before or after law school).

Math and statistics courses are also a good idea. It seems that more and more cases in a variety of areas are relying on some form of statistical analysis in the presentation of evidence. One example is the statistical work on "disparate impact" done in civil rights cases. Another concerns DNA matching such as in the O.J. Simpson trial. If you are the attorney responsible for presenting such statistical evidence, you need to understand the statistics well enough that you can explain it to others (clients, judges, jury members) who may have little or no knowledge of statistics.

Sometimes you can take selected courses at the law school. These special courses are either part of a particular program or may be crosslisted as an undergrad course with another department. Crosslisted courses are open to both undergrads and law students, and are taught by the law school faculty. There are several advantages of such courses: 1) you get an opportunity to see first-hand what a law school course is like, 2) you can see how you "stack-up" against your school's law students, and 3) you get to meet one of the law school faculty members. The last point may be the most important. The student who told me about the law school class he took said he received the high grade and the professor wrote him a letter of recommendation. I discuss more about letters of recommendation below, but I think it is safe to assume that your chances of being admitted to your college's law school are improved if you get a member of the law school faculty to write you a letter of recommendation.

Try to take classes that challenge you. Do not take easy classes simply to get a high grade point average. A good GPA is certainly important (see below), but it is not an end in itself. Neither is "going to law school." The process has only begun when you get to law school. If you do not enjoy the challenge of difficult and complicated material requiring hours of often incredibly boring reading, then law school may not be for you.

Regardless of what classes you take, try to have a *Positive Mental Attitude*. If you take a class because "it's required" or "I need it to get into law school" rather than because you want to learn the material, you will probably not do as well. The class may very well be required, but if you approach it with a positive attitude you will do better and learn more.

To sum up, if you have a choice of what courses to take, look for something that will do one of the following for you: 1) improve your reading skills, 2) improve your writing skills, 3) improve your speaking skills, 4) improve your math skills. You can improve your math skills in a variety of courses outside the Math Department, such as Business, Economics, Statistics, even some Political Science courses. Use these four things as a guide when you are selecting courses. *Do not* take courses that are not going to do anything for you other than build up your grade point average (more on this later).

I recently had an opportunity to ask an admissions officer at Washington University (in St. Louis) about the admissions process there. One of the questions I asked was whether certain majors or courses did a better job of preparing students for law school. I also asked the extent to which the admissions committee examined an applicant's curriculum. She responded as follows:

Political Science majors account for about one-fourth of our entering students each year. That doesn't mean that we prefer Poli Sci majors, but for obvious reasons, those students often steer themselves toward law school. Aside from Poli Sci, we see students who major in everything from the sciences to humanities to business—almost anything you could imagine. Rather than looking for a particular major, we look for applicants with well-rounded educations. For example, while we admit students with science backgrounds,

we take special care to see that they have significant writing experience. Since writing is a large part of law school, writing ability is important in an application. Courses that stress timed essay exams tend to prepare students well for law school, much as logic courses might help them prepare for the LSAT.

We review the transcripts of each applicant; however, transcripts from applications with index numbers below our medians will need to be reviewed more carefully. We look for challenging courses, a comprehensive course selection (including courses from a variety of disciplines), and strong performance overall.

In addition to taking a challenging, well-rounded course load, I suggest that students take classes in which they're interested. Not only does that make the semesters more bearable, but students tend to perform better in subjects they enjoy.

One of my former students sent me some comments about courses. His initial reply was, "writing, writing, writing." He followed up with the comments below on courses (as well as some of those in the prelaw question above).

I think you dead on with everything you said here. I would particularly recommend your courses, as would everyone I know who took them and went onto law school. I think math is under emphasized in the legal profession in general (one would be shocked how many very intelligent lawyers lack the ability to do even simple math). I have found my knowledge of statistics and basic math skills I picked up by getting my B.S. more useful in practice than in law school because most law professors are as innumerate as their students. I think I emphasized in my e-mail to you a few weeks ago the importance of writing in law school and the practice of law. Lawyers write. It is what we do almost exclusively for a living with the exception of some exclusively trial practitioners (this is limited almost exclusively to criminal practice at the state level). Along this line, I think anything that requires one to write is helpful. Particularly, as a litigator, I have found classes I took in non-fiction writing particularly useful. The art of turning a set of facts into a narrative or story to support your case is of great importance both in trial work and in appellate work.

The Political Science Department has an Alumni Board that meets at least once a year to provide input to the Department. Not surprisingly, many of the members of the Board are attorneys and at a recent meeting I took the opportunity to ask a couple of them what advice I could pass along to current prelaw students. One Board member suggested that prelaw students:

1. work on communication skills
2. work on people skills
3. be entrepreneurial

A second Board member offered the following three bits of advice:

1. work on number skills (be able to put dollar amounts on things)
2. be able to tell stories
3. take abnormal psychology

Although the Board members didn't actually specify courses (except abnormal psych) they echoed other things I've mentioned here. Communication skills are very important. You can work on these in a variety of courses, not just speech or communication courses. Number skills are important for several reasons. Again, such skills can be obtained in several types of courses other than math and statistics. The people skills relates to communications skills, as well as psychology (not just abnormal psych, though, as the Board member told me, in a general practice you must often learn to deal with folks who have problems of one sort or another). Of course, people skills are also something that you can work on outside of class in a variety of extracurricular activities.

What should I do if I think I am going to get a bad grade in a course?

Study harder and better. First, be sure that you are putting enough time into the course. Lots of study time, however, will not guarantee a good grade. If you think you are putting in a lot of study time, but are still not doing well, *talk to your instructor*. See if he or she can help by explaining the material or by giving you tips on how to

think about the material. My experience has been that most students rarely talk to their instructor, especially if the class is large, and when they do it is usually a day or two before a test or paper deadline. By this time it is probably too late. One or two days is not going to make much of a difference if you do not understand the course material. Unfortunately, you may *think* you understand the material, at least until you do poorly on an assignment. There are a few ways to avoid this problem. First, regularly talk with your instructor. *Think of questions* about the material you can ask the instructor after class or during office hours. (Being a good student is not a passive process.) Second, get together with other students to discuss the material, especially if you do not want to speak with the instructor. Form a study group that meets regularly, say once a week for an hour (a common strategy of law students), or just talk with others in the class informally ("Say, did you understand what the instructor said about this issue?"). One way or another, *think* about the course material. Be a *student* not a *stenographer*.

Unfortunately, you may run into a course that you just cannot handle (I did more than once—I now refer to them as “character builders”). Do not give up, and try to make the best of it, especially if it is required for your major. Even if the course is not required I do not advise quitting, at least not without giving it your best shot first. Quitting early to save your GPA shows a poor attitude. You should care about your GPA, but you should care more about *learning* something or *improving* your skills. Nevertheless, there may be times you should cut your losses.

If your courseload is too heavy, or other problems arise (personal, financial, etc.), you may want or need to drop a course. If you are on financial aid be sure that dropping a course will not affect your aid. Many times you have to maintain full-time status to keep your financial aid. Check with the financial aid office before you drop. Also keep in mind that depending on when you drop it may cost you money; you may not get all your tuition back and may have to pay a fee of some sort. If you are on a four-year plan, you must determine whether dropping a course will disqualify you from the plan.

Some students have asked if they should take a course outside their major Pass/Nonpass if they know it will be difficult. (You cannot take a course in your major as P/N, at least in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.) I do not advise this, in part for the reasons stated above. In addition, you may have more explaining to do when law school admission officers see this on your transcript. When students want to take a course P/N, I worry that they may not try as hard because you only need a C- to pass. This can result in actually doing so poorly that you do not even receive a Pass. (I had this happen to a graduating student once. He ended up with a D in the course, so he did not even get the credits and had to make them up.) In addition, keep in mind there are limits on how many credits you can have as P/N.

Some courses in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences can be taken Satisfactory/Fail. My understanding is that this is not much different from Pass/Nonpass. One important difference is that P/N courses are not counted in one's GPA (and if you receive an N the credits do not count toward graduation—even if you would have received the letter grade of D in the course). S/F courses are a bit different in that courses in which you receive an S are not included in GPA calculations, but *those of F are* (though, again, the credits do not count toward graduation).

An alternative to both the P/N and S/F options is to audit a course. Auditing a course means you pay for it, but receive no credit and do not get a grade. The advantage is that you get a chance to take a course without it hurting your grade if it is too difficult. If it turns out not to be that bad, you can sign up for it again and should do very well the second time. Obviously, to make this a successful strategy you need the time and the money. Also keep in mind you are supposed to do all the work for a course even if you are only auditing. If you do not, the instructor may give you a "W" (instead of an "R" for registered). Check with the instructor to see what he or she expects of you.

Another way to think about auditing is to consider it a warm-up for taking the course for a grade. With some difficult material the only way to learn it is to see it more than once. The first time you see it you simply may not understand it. Seeing it the second time may greatly improve your understanding. (This is why you should do your readings *before* going to class so you are seeing the material for the *second* time during lectures and the *third* time when studying before a test.) Keep in mind that the decision whether to take a course for a grade does not have to be made until several weeks into the semester. If you are lucky you will have had a test or other graded assignment before the deadline so you have an idea of how much you understand the course material.

Suppose you stay in the course, but still get a grade you think is too low. You can repeat the course and take a second-grade-only option. (If your major is in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences; the SGO is not available to juniors and seniors in the College of Business.) If you take this option, both grades remain in your permanent record, but the first is marked with a "#" to indicate you repeated the course and it is not included in the calculation of your GPA. If you exercise this option make sure you turn in the required paperwork on time. If you do not, *both* grades will be included in your GPA. Also, keep in mind that with the SGO you pay for the course twice.

There are a number of restrictions on exercising the Second Grade Option at both the University and Departmental levels, be sure you are aware of them.

Should I take summer courses? Can I take them at another university?

Whatever you do, *do not* consider summer break a vacation. That attitude should have ended with high school. During summer break you should try to get a job, preferably one that will help your résumé (see below). Summer jobs and internships during your undergraduate years will help you get better summer jobs and internships during law school, which will help you get a better job when you graduate. (This is true even if you do not go to law school.)

Sometimes, however, you may find yourself needing to take summer classes. This can occur because you need additional credits to graduate on time, or courses you need were not offered (or were closed), or you do not have a summer job or internship. It is also possible that you want to graduate early and are taking summer classes to do it. Whatever the reason, there are some things you should know about summer classes at the UI.

The UI offers its summer courses during three summer sessions: an intense three-week session in May, a six-week session from mid-June through July, and an eight-week session during June and July. The eight-week session seems to still be the primary one. Its length makes it essentially a half-semester. Thus, to get in a full semester's material you must go to class twice as often. During the summer, the workload for a three credit class is really like that of a six credit class. You should plan accordingly. It is probably not a good idea to take more than six, or maybe nine credits—particularly if the courses have a fair amount of reading. Going to class everyday does not allow you much time to absorb the material, making it even more important to keep up with the readings or other work in the course. These problems are compounded for the six- and three-week sessions. (Note: Because of budget problems there was talk of reorganizing the three summer sessions, but as I write this it appears that we will still have all three sessions.)

Aside from the intensity of the shortened summer sessions, you may not have much of a selection. Political Science, and many other departments, tend to offer more lower division courses than upper division courses during the summer. This problem worsens when departments attempt to offer courses in all three summer sessions. Even if the course you want is being taught in the summer, it might not be in the session you need.

Summers in Iowa can also be very hot and miserably humid. This can make it tempting to skip class, particularly if your living quarters are not air-conditioned and you are not getting proper rest. If your classes are in an air-conditioned building this will help. If your classrooms are not air-conditioned, it can make going to class very unpleasant. There is not much that can be done if you have to take classes, but at least know what you are getting into.

Some students want to take courses at another university or college during the summer, perhaps one closer to their home. Before you do, check with the registrar's office to be sure the UI will accept credits from that institution. Also check with your department to be sure those credits will apply to your particular degree program. It is okay if you do not care about them transferring, or just want to take an extra course, but if you do want to apply the course to your UI program check with the UI registrar and your department *first*. You should also check with the registrar to be sure that transferring courses does not complicate your UI residency requirements. For example, in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences you must take your last 30 consecutive credits in residence (i.e., at the UI), or 45 of the final 60, or an overall total of 90 credits in residence. These numbers can be particularly important for students who have transferred into the UI and may want to take some additional credits at another college during summers. Most transfer students will not be able to meet the 90-credit requirement, so will need to try to satisfy one of the other two options. That may limit the ability to transfer in any additional credits.

In addition to the summer sessions, the UI now has a short Winter session. It is much like the intense three-week session after the end of Spring semester. The specific dates on the Winter session vary by course, but generally occur in the few weeks prior to the start of Spring semester.

If my department offers it, should I try to get a BS rather than a BA?

Yes. Political Science and some other departments allow students to earn a Bachelor of Science degree for the major rather than a Bachelor of Arts. In Political Science the main difference is the addition of three math and statistics courses. (See our *Guide to Undergraduate Study*—available in our main office, 341 Schaeffer, or online at www.polisci.uiowa.edu.) On a practical level, and as I mentioned above, the extra math and statistics courses will give you additional analytical training that will be helpful in a variety of ways in law school. In addition, the BS is viewed as a more rigorous degree than the BA. That may be helpful in terms of getting into law school, or in getting a job.

In addition to the math and statistics courses, our department requires that BS students take an Undergraduate Research Tutorial. These tutorials operate much like independent study courses, except that they are a set three credits. Like an independent study, you must find a faculty member to supervise you. I generally suggest that students first approach faculty members they have had for a previous course. If that does not work out, you can contact the department's Director of Undergraduate Studies and he or she should be able to give you some suggestions on who might be willing to supervise you. In my case, spring semesters I teach a research course that qualifies as a substitute for the research tutorial. Students who have had that course sometimes do advanced work on the project for their research tutorial. Other faculty members will have different approaches and students will need to work out the specific requirements with them individually.

What does it take to get into law school?

Not a whole lot really. You need to demonstrate that you can read and analyze various types of material. (More on this below.) It is not that difficult to get into a law school. It may be difficult to get into *some* law schools (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Michigan), but as long as you have relatively good statistics (see next question) there is a law school somewhere that will take you (and your money). The legal profession cheerfully admits lots of students into lots of law schools. The weeding out process occurs during law school, after law school when you have to pass a state bar exam, and as a new attorney when you are faced with the long hours and a heavy workload.

Getting Into Law School Today, by Thomas H. Martinson and David P. Waldherr, is a very good book that examines the process in detail. The book is worth its modest price if you are planning on applying to some of the top law schools. Although I do not agree with everything they say, I found the chapters on the admissions process, completing the application, and the personal statement to be very informative. A more recent book that covers much of the same material, and which is also quite good, is *How to Get Into the Right Law School* by Paul Lermack. *How to Get into Law School* by Susan Estrich (who is a law professor, but more famous as a political operative and pundit) also has some good points to make. Estrich's book contains a lot of charts and tables which are mostly out of date. She also focuses a lot more how to get into elite law schools, mainly because that is her experience. (She has a Harvard law degree and has taught at Harvard and USC.) Despite this, many of her points and suggestions are worth thinking about.

How does a law school evaluate applicants?

In their book, Martinson and Waldherr (see above) say that law schools evaluate applicants on four basic criteria: 1) ability, 2) motivation, 3) commitment, and 4) diversity. Ability is primarily measured by your grade point average (GPA) and LSAT score. Neither is determinative. If both are high you should have a good chance of being admitted. A high LSAT score can make up for a lower GPA. Similarly, a high GPA can compensate for a slightly lower LSAT (if it is quite low, and you think you can do better, you might want to retake the test—but see below). Law schools tend to place greater emphasis on the LSAT because they cannot always be sure that a "3.5" average, for example, means the same thing for every school, or even for every major in the same school. On a practical level, most law schools use some formula to combine your GPA and LSAT into an index. Applicants are then ranked according to their index number. If you have a high index number you are more likely to be admitted. Nevertheless, high numbers do not guarantee admittance and moderately low numbers do not guarantee rejection. Other items in your application may tip the balance one way or the other. (The United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit decided a case in 1995 involving an affirmative action program at the University of Texas Law School. In its opinion, *Hopwood v. Texas*, the court described at length the procedures used by the UT law school in

making its admissions decisions. I highly recommend that you read this opinion, which can be found at 78 F 3d 932 – volume 78 of the third series of the Federal Reporter, page 932 – in the law library or online.)

Let me make a few additional comments on formulas and how the LSAT fits into them. Not long ago one of my students gave me a copy of a sheet called the “Admission Index Information Sheet for LSAT Scores on the 120-180 Scale.” I had not been aware of this sheet, but the student told me it was sent to her as part of the materials related to taking the LSAT. As its name suggests, this sheet contains the formulas used by the various law schools. (Most, but not all, law schools were listed.) Of course, by itself the formula does not tell us all that much because the various cutoff points are likely to change slightly each year. Even so, the formulas generally contain three items: LSAT score, GPA, and a constant. The formulas indicate how much weight the law schools put on each factor. For example, according to the 2000 sheet, the University of Iowa used the formula: $0.826 \times \text{LSAT} + 11.203 \times \text{GPA} + 2.27$. I discuss the formulas at some length in one of my classes (30:116) when we cover *Hopwood*, but let me just make two main points here. First, I initially thought the UI formula seemed odd because it did not total to some round number. I later learned that some schools derive the formula by using LSAT and GPA to predict an applicant’s later first year law school grades. In addition, I was told the scales are altered to make it less obvious that the index is used to predict first year grades. Even so, you can see from the formulas that some schools structure their index to put the scores on, for example, a 100-point scale. Second, and more important, I was somewhat shocked to find how much more heavily the LSAT is weighted in relation to the GPA. From the 2000 sheet the UI, for example, weighted the GPA as only 23.16% compared to the LSAT’s 76.84%. (Even weighting would be 50%-50%.) The most weight any law school gave to the GPA that year was the University of California at Berkeley at 37.47%. After Berkeley, the scores dropped off quickly and the majority were below 20% for the GPA. Although I do not want to stress anyone out, it would seem that scoring a point or two higher on the LSAT can make a substantial difference in the score on most admission indices. I discuss all this a bit more on my web pages. (Go to the Advising/Prelaw page and then click on the Admission Index link).

One reason law schools may weigh the LSAT more heavily is that it makes it easier to compare applicants. With the GPA, a 3.5, for example, may not mean quite the same thing from one university to another or from one major to another. This makes comparisons difficult. I asked the Wash U admissions officer (mentioned in a previous question) how an applicant’s undergraduate program was evaluated:

That's a great question, especially since we evaluate a very diverse applicant pool. We receive applications from extremely different undergraduate institutions across the country, and identifying which programs are more rigorous than others is important in our decision-making process.

Of course the national reputation of the school and our knowledge of undergraduate institutions, based on our experience in Admissions, gives us a base for evaluating the strength of a particular program. Our work with prelaw advisors at undergraduate institutions also helps to give us an insight into the caliber of the program. Following our past and current students throughout their law school careers is another way to track how well their undergraduate institution prepared them for law school.

As part of the applicant's LSDAS report that we receive from Law Services (the organization that administers the LSAT exam and coordinates the LSDAS reports), there is an analysis of all LSAT test-takers from the applicant's undergraduate institution. This "degree school" analysis includes:

1. A report of the other LSAT test-taking students from that applicant's degree granting institution: what percentage of those students scored in the 0-20th percentile, 20th-24th percentile, 25th-29th percentile, etc. up to the 95th percentile and up on the LSAT exam.
2. A similar GPA report on the student's degree-granting institution: showing percentages of other LSAT test-takers from that institution who earned 1.59-0 GPA, 1.60-1.79, 1.80-1.99, 2.00-2.19, etc. up to 4.00.

For example, an LSDAS report for a student from UI would include such an analysis on LSAT and GPA percentages for other Iowa undergrads or alums who took the LSAT exam. This analysis is very important to the Admissions Committee members evaluating files. It gives us a nice idea of how strong the undergrad institution is. For a UI student, the Percentage of LSAT report reads something like this: 8% of test takers from UI scored in the 0-19 percentile, 4% in the 20-24th percentile, 3% in the 25-29th percentile, 5% in the 30-

34th, 4% in the 35-39th, 5% in the 40-44th, 5% in the 45-49th, 5% in the 50-54th, 8% in the 55-59th, 7% in the 60-64th, 5% in the 65-69th, 9% in the 70-74th, 7% in the 75-79th, 7% in the 80-84th, 7% in the 85-89th, 6% in the 90-94th, 5% in the 95th and higher. These statistics demonstrate that students coming from UI have relatively higher test scores than other LSAT test takers, giving us a signal that the University of Iowa is a relatively strong institution.

To give you an idea of how students from other (randomly selected) institutions rank, recent LSDAS reports for Princeton students indicated that 41% of their test takers scored in the 95th percentile or higher, 33% of Duke students scored in the 95th percentile or higher, 22% of Cornell students, 15% of Washington University students, 12% of Vanderbilt students, 9% of the Univ. of Illinois students, 7% of the Univ. of Kansas students, 6% of Boston College students, 5% of Univ. of Oklahoma students, 4% of Dickinson College students, and 3% of Syracuse Univ. students scored in the 95th percentile or higher. This information is an important factor in determining the quality of these schools.

Martinson and Waldherr's next two criteria, motivation and commitment, are more difficult to measure. Usually law schools will look for items on your résumé that show you are an active person. For example, if you tell the law school you are interested in corporate law, you should have something on your résumé that shows this interest. You can also show motivation if you earned good grades despite personal or financial hardship. In general, activities for your résumé can include a vast array of items such as belonging to a fraternity or sorority (especially if you have held some office), student government, intercollegiate athletics, other intercollegiate activities, a job (especially if it is in law or politics), honor societies, committees, councils, military service, and so on. Having a strong résumé can help to compensate for a lower GPA. On the other hand, do not simply join several groups just to have a long list on your résumé. A long list might cause the school to wonder about how much time you were able to devote to any of the organizations and activities, and whether you had a strong commitment to any of them. The point of participating in groups is to give you valuable experiences, not lines on the résumé.

Most law schools also look to satisfy diversity goals. For the most part, this refers to gender and minority representation in the law school. In a broader sense, however, it may also include experiences you may have had that law school administrators believe will add to the mix of the student body. For example, if you were a professional musician it may give you a different perspective that will add to class discussions.

One final comment on the GPA. Taking easy classes just to build up your GPA is a bad idea for two reasons. First, a difficult curriculum looks better than an easy one, even if your grades are a bit lower. Second, if you do not take challenging courses as an undergraduate, law school will be a waste of time. By that I mean that you probably will not make it past the first semester because you have not adequately prepared yourself for the rigors of law school and the study of the law.

How can I improve a "low" GPA?

Keep in mind that a "low" GPA is somewhat relative to the law school you want to attend. I will assume for purposes of this question that you know that your GPA is low for the law schools that most interest you.

Although law schools put far less weight on the GPA than the LSAT, the GPA is still important. An applicant with a low GPA and high LSAT might be considered a bit of a slacker who tests well, and is thus given less consideration than someone with a lower LSAT and better GPA. As important as the LSAT is, law school is still about coursework and the admissions committees will want to know that you can handle it (which is why just taking more easy courses does not help). There are three basic things you can do to help compensate for a low GPA.

First, emphasize the strong points of your grades. For a variety of reasons many students have a rough first year or two and then do very well in their last two years. You can explain your initial problems and then emphasize that your grades were much improved your final years. If you switched from a very difficult major and your grades improved you can emphasize your GPA within your major. (Plus, a few schools specifically look at your GPA in your last two years and some at your major GPA).

Second, you can still take additional classes even if you have already graduated. Universities handle this in different ways, but at most it is some form of continuing education program. Taking additional courses after graduation—and doing well in them—will demonstrate your academic abilities to admissions committees. Along

these lines, you might even consider pursuing an additional degree. This will help to improve your overall qualifications in addition to any specific GPA concerns.

Third, you might also consider graduate school, particularly a one or two year master's degree program. Law school is a form of graduate school. If the admissions committee has concerns about your ability to perform at the graduate level, getting a master's degree should increase your chances of getting into the school you desire. (Again, assuming you do well in the program.)

Fourth, if additional school is not an option (because you doubt you will do better, because of financial reasons, etc.) you might also consider working for a year or two. Although this will not directly affect your GPA, it will tend to strengthen other parts of your record. The work experience will certainly be a plus that you can emphasize in your application materials. Many times a lower GPA is the result of being, as the saying goes, "young and foolish." In addition to the work experience, the time away from school will allow one to mature. Again, something you can emphasize in your application materials.

How important is the personal statement?

Most law schools ask you to write a personal statement. This may be the most difficult part of the application because most people are not used to writing about themselves. Martinson and Waldherr believe this to be the most important part of the application. (Estrich says it is the second most important after the LSAT and GPA.) On the other hand, a former student of mine a few years out of law said he thought the personal statement was overemphasized. At the very least, it is the only part you have control over in the short term (your GPA and LSAT are pretty much set). Many law schools receive so many applications from students with high numbers (e.g., over 3.5 GPA and 90th percentile on the LSAT) that they cannot distinguish between applicants on that basis. This is why schools like Michigan and Harvard do not provide information on the numbers of students accepted from various categories of GPA and LSAT scores. Nevertheless, Yale did provide this information in an edition of the *ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools (Official Guide)*. (The *Official Guide* is also available online at the LSAC website, www.lsac.org.) Having a 3.5 GPA and being in the 90th percentile on the LSAT are pretty good numbers, but Yale accepted only 61 of the 506 applicants in this general range (3.5+ GPA and 165-169 LSAT) : over 8 to 1 odds against getting in. Overall, for that academic year Yale received nearly 18 applications for every available opening. This makes your résumé, personal statement, and letters of recommendation that much more important. I suggest you look at Martinson and Waldherr's book (or others that are available) for advice on drafting a personal statement, but let me give you the short version here.

According to Martinson and Waldherr, your personal statement should focus on your ability, motivation, or special perspective. If your other application information (e.g., GPA or LSAT) makes your ability clear, then focus your statement on one of the other items. Martinson and Waldherr indicate that successful letters they have seen tend to follow one of three formats. The first is the "motivation" format. In this format you describe events that have prompted you to consider going to law school and what you plan to do with a law degree. Martinson and Waldherr suggest that this format is particularly good for those returning to school after working for several years.

The second general format is the "significant event." With this format you describe some significant event or achievement and draw a moral that you learned from it. This format may be particularly good for those whose other application materials show ability and motivation and who would like to demonstrate uniqueness in some way. If you use this format, however, you should be careful to not drift into what I refer to as the "epiphany" format. The point of describing the significant event is to tell the law school something about you or what you learned from the event, not (necessarily) how you decided to go to law school in a moment of inspiration.

The third general format is the "argument for admission." In this format you gather bits of evidence and information not found elsewhere in your application and put them together to argue for your admission. This approach to the statement may be appropriate for those whose application materials do not do an adequate job of indicating ability and motivation.

Here are some additional things to keep in mind for your personal statement:

- Do not just repeat information that can be found in other parts of your application materials (e.g., GPA, major). You can certainly expand on some item, such as membership in a group, but have a reason for doing so. Use the personal statement to provide additional information to the law school.
- Do not write a “save the world” personal statement. You can certainly mention what you plan to do with your law degree, but it is not a good idea to talk about the shortcomings of the legal system with the assumption that you will be able to fix everything. Also, as much as law schools like people interested in public service, they also like folks that will take powerful jobs that reflect well on the school (and increase the potential for them sending back those alumni dollars!).
- Avoid spelling and grammar mistakes in the personal statement. At a minimum, the statement is a writing sample. It will demonstrate your ability to put together a few paragraphs on a common theme. In other words, it will show your ability to communicate in writing. As such, you need to make sure that your statement does not contain spelling and grammar errors. (An Admissions Director once told me she saw Admissions Committee members actually edit personal statements for spelling and grammar. Estrich says there is zero tolerance for spelling and grammar errors in personal statements.) Along similar lines, do not try to impress the law school with the use of legal terminology or “big words.” Neither will impress the law school and they may tend to make you look pompous or insincere.
- Unless an application specifies otherwise, keep your personal statement to about two double-spaced pages (about 500 words). Again, the point of the statement is to demonstrate your writing ability and to tell the law school something about yourself. Admissions committees read thousands of applications and it is unlikely that they want to read long and rambling statements.
- Write *several* drafts of your personal statement. Again, this is the only part of your application that you have control over in the short term, so do not waste the opportunity to improve your chances. I recommend that folks take the LSAT in June (see below) and that would be a good time to write a first draft. Work on it a few times then put it aside for a few weeks. Work on it again when you finalize your decision about which law schools you will apply to, and then again when you are getting your application materials together. You can then make final changes before sending your materials out.

The Law School Admission Council (aka Law Services, the folks who administer the LSAT and assemble application materials) suggests that personal statements should be an evaluation of past experiences and actual accomplishments rather than future plans. If you have overcome a substantial obstacle or have had a significant event in your life it might be worth writing about, but they advise going beyond merely describing the obstacle or event and explaining how it affected you, what you learned from it, etc.

Some years ago I attended a personal statement workshop put on by one of the LSAT test prep companies. Among other advice (most of which is similar to what I have provided above) they included a Do/Don't list (which they apparently gathered from various sources). Here is a version of this list (with my additional comments in italics). One thing to keep in mind is that you might not be able to do or avoid all the items in each list.

Things to Do in your statement:

- Tell a story – *This is okay, but make sure the story has a point. Again, you are attempting to tell the Admissions Committee something about yourself.*
- Make it interesting – *Sounds obvious, but if you are not a good writer or do not have something interesting to say it could be more difficult.*
- Be funny, if you can pull it off – *The “if” part of that is very important. The example given in the workshop was not all that funny. Plus, you have to be careful that what you think is funny someone else might think offensive. Self-depreciating humor is usually good, but use caution regardless. Estrich advises to be very careful about the use of humor.*
- Start with a great lead – *Right, but what if you cannot think of a great lead? Still, this advice is good if you think of it as a reminder of how you need to grab the reader right away.*

- Be “Unique” – Again, great advice, but what if you don’t have anything that’s “unique” in this sense? Certainly everyone is different in many ways, but perhaps not in the ways that stand out for Admissions Committees.
- Have a general theme – This is basically another way of saying that you need to have a point to your statement. In other words, what is it that you are trying to tell the readers (something you learned, how something affected you, etc.)
- Don’t be afraid to express opinions – This is fine, but use caution. Aside from the fact that the personal statement is not the place to hold forth on the political issues of the day, you may run the risk of offending some Admissions Committee members if they find your opinions offensive.
- Tailor your statement to a particular school – This was not possible when the application process first went electronic, but now you can. When applications were sent directly to the schools I had few students write different statements. The usual time it happened was when applicants had a particular reason for wanting to go to the UI Law School, so they would write one for the UI and a more general one for all the other schools. This might be good if a school has some particular aspect that you really like (e.g., a clinic, a special program), but it might not even come up if your statement focuses more on some personal story.
- Open up a little – As with being funny, use caution here. You should be honest about your reaction to whatever event or experience you are discussing, but the personal statement is not the place to unburden your soul.

Things to Avoid in your statement:

- Avoid the resume approach – As mentioned previously, do not just repeat things that the reader can find in other parts of your application.
- Avoid the “Why I want to go to law school” statement – This can sometimes be difficult to avoid entirely, but the point is not to use as your theme “I want to go to law school because . . .” Rather, write about the event or experience you have chosen and if you wish you can connect it to your desire to attend law school.
- Avoid the “I want to save the world” approach – I agree and have mentioned this above. It also fits with the LSAC advice on talking about actual experiences rather than future plans.
- Avoid talking about your negatives – Yes and no. You certainly do not want to exclusively talk about your negatives, but you might be able to incorporate something negative that ended up being a learning experience (e.g., how you did not consider the needs of those in wheelchairs until you had to use one yourself).
- Don’t be too personal – Although the Do list advises you to open up, do not go too far with it.
- Watch the use of fancy vocabulary – I cautioned about this above when I said to stay away from using “big words” to try to impress the reader.
- Don’t discuss legal concepts – Ditto.
- Avoid immature subjects – This should be obvious, but the point may be to think about the purpose of the personal statement and who will be reading it.
- Don’t put down lawyers or the legal profession – Again, this should be obvious. Sometimes this type of statement is part of a “save the world” (or save the profession) approach. Talking about the good you want to do as an attorney can be fine, but avoid getting into how other lawyers are bad, etc.
- Avoid the bizarre – This should also be obvious, may not always be clear. (You may not think it strange that black ops helicopters are hovering over your house at night, but revealing this information in your personal statement may not be to your advantage.) Again, use caution here (and get a second opinion).
- Don’t try to cover too many subjects – Right. The statement is usually only 500 words, which is not very long. You may feel you need to mention several things in your statement, but that will often just make it seem cluttered or unfocused. You might be able to include some information in additional explanatory statements. For the personal statement you may just have to choose one of many topics you are considering. If you are facing this

problem, you might try writing several different statements and have someone read them all and give you feedback.

One final point about personal statements. As mentioned above, when the application process became centralized and electronic through LSDAS it was no longer possible to tailor your personal statement to particular schools (unless you sent the statement to the school directly). My understanding is that you can now upload separate statements for each law school. For the most part, and depending on the topic of your statement, one general statement will probably work for all the law schools. To the extent that you want to write something different for a particular school, just be sure that you are sending the correct statement to each school (e.g., do not send a statement to Minnesota saying why you want to go to Iowa's law school). If the topic of your essay does not give you the opportunity to tailor it in some way, you might be able to send a supplementary statement to select schools. If LSDAS does not offer this as an option, you can send this directly to the law school.

How important are the letters of recommendation?

The final items required by most law schools (aside from the application fee!) are the letters of recommendation. I suspect that in most cases the impact of such letters is marginal. They are primarily used in borderline cases. Even so, if you are competing with someone else who has similar "numbers" to yours, the letters may be very important. For such letters to be useful you need to get to know the people you want to write letters for you. If you plan to ask a professor for a letter of reference, you need to make yourself known beyond merely sitting in class. If the professor allows classroom participation, do it (but remember quality, not just quantity). See the professor during office hours to talk about the class. This gives the professor an opportunity to see you as an individual with an interest in the material (whining about grades does not count). This is especially important in larger classes (40+). Advisors, job supervisors, or other people may also be appropriate letter writers. (I had one of my professors, my honors advisor who was also a professor, and a dean I had gotten to know during extracurricular activities write letters for me.) Each law school has different requirements, be sure to know what they are.

Let me expand on this a bit. Most schools now ask for two or three letters of recommendation. Unless you have a really good reason for doing so, I recommend against sending more than three letters. Again, admissions committees read thousands of applications and you do not want them to get a negative impression of your application because you had an excessive number of letter writers. Two good reasons for sending in an extra letter may be if you are unsure whether one of your letters writers will submit the letter on time (though if you have that concern you might choose someone else in the first place) or if someone can speak to why you should go to a specific law school. (My understanding is that LSDAS now provides the ability to have letters or recommendation sent to particular schools rather than each letter going to all schools on your list. If you are not sure about doing this through LSDAS, you can send the letter directly to the law school in question, but not all schools approve of this so be sure to be sure to check if they allow direct letters.) Some schools may make letters of recommendation "optional," but you should still send in at least two letters.

At least one of your letter writers should be a professor you had. (Avoid grad students and TAs.) A primary concern for admissions committees will be your ability to handle the academic rigors of law school. Professors will be best able to comment on your academic abilities. (Of course, you should pick a professor in whose class you did well!) The professor will be able to provide more detailed information on you if you have been in more than one course with him or her, or a course that had a small enrollment, but sometimes your choices are limited.

Your second (or third) letter writer can be another professor, or it can be just about anyone else who has observed you and can comment on your intellectual abilities or work ethic. One advantage to getting a nonprofessor to write a letter is that the person can comment on your abilities in another area. This may help to demonstrate that you are well-rounded or that you bring the same enthusiasm and motivation to your extracurricular activities as to your studies.

There are two things worth mentioning that you should avoid when choosing someone to write a letter for you. First, avoid someone who cannot write very well. The letter writer is supposed to be making an argument for your admission to the law school. The letter will not be very persuasive if the writer cannot put together some reasonably coherent statements on your behalf. This goes for professors as well as other writers. For example, I had a student some years ago tell me that she decided not to ask a particular professor to write for her because some things that professor had written and given to the class contained several grammar and spelling errors.

The second thing to avoid is the “famous person” letter. I have had several students intern for well known politicians and lawyers. They often would like to have that famous person write their letter of recommendation for them. I advise against this unless the famous person actually supervised them. In most cases the famous person did not actually supervise the student, and the letter would just be written by someone else for the famous person’s signature anyway. Admissions committees are aware of this and would likely discount the letter. My recommendation is to have the student’s supervisor write the letter in the first place. That person will have better knowledge of the student’s abilities and it should be just as persuasive to have the “chief of staff” (or whomever) write the letter.

When you select someone to write a letter for you, you obviously want the writer to tell the law school how wonderful you are. How do you know if the writer wrote a poor evaluation of you? You do not. You are asked to sign a voluntary waiver of your right to see your letters of recommendation. You should sign this waiver. If you do not, the law school may think you are hiding something even if you are not. If you are concerned that someone may write a bad letter, do not ask that person to write for you. Personally, I will refuse to write a letter of recommendation rather than write a bad letter, and I believe most faculty members take this approach. Your letter writer may not care about the waiver, but the law school might, so sign it.

When someone has agreed to write you a letter of recommendation there are several things you should give him or her. If your writers have only known you a short while or only from classes, ask if they would like to see a copy of your transcript. If you have written any papers for their classes you should also ask if they would like to see them or any other papers you have written. (Note that this assumes you go back and get your papers and other written assignments from the professor, if you do not they will probably be thrown away and you will be out of luck.) The writers may not want these items, but you should ask and provide them if necessary. You will probably want the writers to send a letter to each of the law schools to which you have applied. Know what each law school requires so you can explain it to your writers. Provide the writers with stamped, addressed envelopes for each school. If possible, give the writers all the materials for all the schools at the same time. The writers can then do all the necessary paperwork in one sitting. You want to make it as easy as possible for the writers to comply with your request. You do not want your letter writers fumbling around looking for addresses, stamps, and forms when they are doing you a favor. In addition, if you are well prepared and have everything in order the writers will have a better impression of you. This may be particularly important if they do not know you very well or only vaguely remember you from class.

The information in the above paragraph is starting to be a bit out of date because LSDAS now handles letters of recommendation the same way they do transcripts. Specifically, each letter writer fills out a form and sends it with the letter to LSDAS. That same letter is then sent to all the schools along with other items in the applicant’s file. On the plus side, this makes it a bit easier for both applicants and letter writers to keep track of whether files are complete, letters written, etc. On the minus side, it means that the writer cannot tailor a letter for a particular school. I have not done it too often, but there are times when I comment directly about why an applicant should get into a particular law school, such as if the school has a program of particular interest to the applicant. I might also not write quite the same letter if the quality of the schools vary greatly. For example, a student that should easily get into the UI, might not be qualified for Harvard, and I would not want to write exactly the same letter. To the extent that writing one letter for all schools is a “problem,” it is more a problem for the letter writer than the applicant. In addition, some schools recognize this difficulty and still require that letters on behalf of their applicants be sent directly to the school. One way around the generic letter is to ask one of your writers to send an additional supplemental letter to a particular school. Another approach is to have an additional letter writer that only writes a letter for a particular school, and which is sent to that school rather than LSDAS.

To summarize:

- Ask your letter writers early so they can plan ahead. The start of fall semester should be enough lead time.
- Line up two or three letter writers, and be thinking of an alternate just in case.
- Provide your letter writers with all the materials at one time if possible.

- Make sure you fill out your portion of the LSDAS form and provide the letter writer with a stamped, addressed envelope. This is especially important if you are also sending materials to the law schools in addition to LSDAS.
- Give the letter writer a copy of your résumé and personal statement. Drafts are fine, they just need some idea of what you are telling the law schools.
- Ask the letter writers if they would also like to see your transcript, class papers, or any other materials.
- Be sure to thank the letter writers!

Will working for a year or two before law school improve my chances of getting in?

There are good reasons for working for a year or two after graduation before starting law school that go beyond simply improving your chances of getting into a particular school. There are certainly reasons to begin law school quickly, particularly if one is already an older student, has a family, or is sure of a job upon graduation (e.g., joining the family business or practice). For most, however, working after graduation will give one a taste of the “real world.” This may sound like a cliché, but the experience you gain from functioning in a work environment can often substantially enhance your law school experience.

Substantively, if you work in an area related to your legal interests you will be able to bring more to your studies. For example, if you are interested in environmental law, working at a related job (in the field, for an organization, etc.) will give you a greater perspective on the legal aspects of the field.

More generally, work experience gives one additional maturity and discipline. The particulars will depend on the job, but working with others, following directions, keeping to a schedule, and meeting deadlines are just some of the things you tend to learn on the job that are important in law school.

Regardless of your GPA and LSAT scores, having additional job experience is a plus. As mentioned in previous questions, obtaining a variety of experiences as an undergraduate is a definite plus when it comes time for applying to law schools. Even so, part time jobs and volunteer efforts are not the same as having a full time position and the responsibility that comes with it. Along these lines, law schools generally recognize that it takes a bit more to give up a salary to return to law school than to just continue on from one’s undergraduate studies. Whether it is due to an increase in maturity or a greater focus of purpose, such students tend to do very well in law school.

I recently had a former student who worked in government for two years before beginning law school. After he completed his first year of law school I asked him if he thought the work experience had helped him in school and in getting a very good clerkship his first summer. He replied as follows:

My two years of professional experience between undergrad and law school, along with taking three of Professor Hagle's pre-law courses at the University of Iowa, without question helped prepare me for my first-year law courses. Actually, going to law school was a nice change of pace from my hectic schedule in my real world job. It seemed like my classmates who came directly from undergrad, however, were overwhelmed by the first two months of classes. They were not used to the intensity of the course loads and the intimidating Socratic method of the professors (which they would have experienced from a demanding boss in the real world). Most importantly, the students without professional experience do not have the real-world context in which to analyze the professor's abstract legal theories. And these students may not have the confidence one gets from the rigors of a real world job to stand their ground with bullying professors.

With my below-average grades and LSAT test scores, compared to my classmates, the University of Iowa College of Law would never have accepted my application, but for my two years of professional experience. Moreover, but for my professional experience, the United States Attorney's Office would not have hired me for a clerkship. The United States Attorney specifically told me he hired me, because I have professional experience.

How do I know if I will get into the law school(s) I want?

There are books available that contain information that may be of some help (e.g., *Official Guide*). These books often have a table containing data on GPAs along one axis and LSAT scores along the other. Find the cell corresponding to your combination of scores and you will find the number of applications the law school received by applicants fitting that combination of scores as well as the number they accepted. Some schools do not provide data that specific, but will indicate the 25th, median, and 75th percentiles of GPA and LSAT for the previous entering class. Either type of data should give you a pretty good idea of your chances with a particular law school. Other factors in your favor will increase your chances (strong résumé, child of alum, minority or woman, etc.). Keep in mind that not all the people a law school accepts attend that school. Most applicants apply to several law schools. (For example, I applied to six and was accepted at five.)

Some schools (e.g., Harvard, Michigan) do not list the LSAT and GPA scores of their applicants. This is primarily because these schools accept only the very top applicants. Such a large number of top applicants apply to these schools that they accept very few below the 90th percentile in either category. The small variation in LSAT and GPA scores means these law schools must make their selections based on other criteria. Such criteria include résumés, letters of recommendation, and personal statements.

To what law schools should I apply?

Clearly, this depends on where you want to go, what you want to do, what you can afford, and where you have the best chance of being accepted. I wanted to go to the west coast, so four of the six schools I applied to were in the west. It is really up to you. There are enough law schools throughout the country that you should be able to pick where you want to go, at least geographically. Keep in mind that many law school graduates stay in the state or region where they went to law school. (See next question for more on this.) If you are interested in a particular type of law, you may want to consider a school in a specific region of the country. For instance, if you are interested in government, you may want to attend a school in the Washington, DC, area. If you are interested in water or mineral rights, a school in the western states may be right for you.

Paying for three years of law school can run into some big bucks. If you can pay in-state tuition somewhere, this may be the least expensive way to go. Many students finance their legal education by taking out low interest loans. You may also want to consider a part-time job, or a full-time job and go to school part-time. If possible, try not to have a job your first year. You should concentrate your entire being on your studies during your first year. If you have to take a job, get something related to law, politics, or government. This will give you an opportunity to put what you are learning into practice, as well as give you more experience when it comes time to graduate and get a job. A legally related job will give you a chance to develop *contacts* (who you know may open more doors for you initially than what you know). This is especially important when it comes time for job hunting.

Many law students apply for summer clerking jobs, usually with law firms. These jobs are important because they give students experience and allow them to make contacts for later employment. Many law students clerk with the same firm the summer after their second year and are then offered a job after graduation. Thus, you (and employers) may be making job decisions after only one semester of law school (possibly earlier). This is one reason it is so important to get the best grades possible during your first year. These grades are often very important for you to get the good clerking jobs that will lead to the good full-time jobs (in addition to activities like law review).

Regarding the region of the country to which you want to go, consider what the job market is in the area as well as the opportunity to develop contacts. (Again, several books have information on this and I imagine you can find more on the web.) You may not plan to stay in the area after law school, but one never knows, and you may want to get a job while attending law school. You should also be aware of the cost of living in the area of the law school. If your funds are relatively limited they will last longer in an area where the cost of living is much lower.

A friend of mine suggested that in considering what law school to attend, one should consider the bar exam. The bar exam is the test one takes after law school to be "admitted to the bar," (i.e., to be allowed to practice law in a state). Each state requires that you pass a bar exam, and each state's bar exam is, at least in part, different from every other's. Although I am not particularly fond of LSAT prep courses (see below), bar review courses are essential for passing a bar exam which, unlike the LSAT, tests your knowledge of specific things you should have learned during law school. If you attend law school in one state and plan to work in another, you may need

additional preparation to take the other state's bar exam. It is a good idea to find out the specifics of a state's bar exam (application procedures, format, who writes and grades the questions, passage rates, etc.) well before you finish law school. In examining law schools, you might want to find out how many of a school's graduates pass the bar exam on their first try. Depending on the state, as many as half of those taking it for the first time fail. (Usually it is closer to 20% to 30%.) You can take it again, but if your job depends on passing the first time, it can be a problem. Thus, a state's bar exam is one factor to consider in choosing a law school. Other factors are mentioned in the next question.

The *Official Guide* contains information on the percentage of students from each school who passed the state bar exam on their first try. Comparing this percentage to the number of all first-time takers gives you an idea of how the school compares to other law schools in the state. Keep in mind, however, that if one school generally has lower admissions standards, those students will likely pass the bar exam at a lower rate regardless of the quality of the school. A school with lower admissions standards whose students do very well on the bar exam is a good sign of the quality of the school.

A former student a few years out of law school sent along these comments.

There is a great article by Richard Posner ["Law School Rankings"] regarding the law school ranking system. In that article, he also proposes that most students would be much better off in terms of job prospects if they attended a lesser ranked school in which they are in the upper percentiles of gpa and lsat scores rather than a higher ranked school that they are in the lower percentile, unless they can get into Harvard, Yale, or a few other of the very highly ranked schools. The idea being that they are much more likely to be higher ranked at the lower school improving their job prospects after the school. I think this is particularly true if one scores high enough to get into a "national" school. For example, one may be a lot better off going to Iowa, Minnesota, or Wisconsin and finishing at the top of their class than going to Georgetown, Michigan, or Northwestern and finishing in the middle to the bottom of their class. (I am not certain I buy that someone will do better at Iowa than Georgetown because I question the reliability of the LSAT's prediction of law school success, when at this level you are really within the margin of error.) Law firms really tend to be opening up to the higher-tier Midwest and West Coast schools, though more prestigious government positions and clerkships tend to still limit themselves to the traditionally elite East Coast schools. At these schools you still have access to the national firms and most major cities. For example, I (a University of Iowa College of Law Grad) work at a large firm in DC and have friends at major firms in New York, LA, Chicago, and other cities across the country. Another option is if a person is certain on a city, a regional school with a little lower ranking may be a better choice. For example, in DC you will see a lot of graduates from Howard, George Mason and American; Chicago firms will have a lot of grads of Chicago-Kent, DePaul, Loyola or John Marshall.

My former student makes a good point, and one that I also make in my next response, but there's another aspect to this. Specifically, if you go to a school where you are more competitive you might do better. In other words, if you barely get into a highly ranked school (i.e., your GPA and LSAT are at the low end for your class) you might very well feel overwhelmed and outmatched intellectually compared to your classmates. On the other hand, if you go to a slightly lower ranked school where your scores are middle of the pack or better, you might feel better about your experience, do better in your courses, and end up placed higher in your class.

Are there different types of law schools?

The answer to this question depends on who you ask. Some will say there are two types of law schools: national and local. The national schools are said to be more theory oriented and usually have better reputations. The local schools are said to teach a more nuts-and-bolts approach oriented to the law of the school's state. From what I can gather, the folks at national law schools support this theory, while those at the local schools reject it. The difference in opinion may boil down to nothing more than institutional snobbery. No matter where the law school is located, it will have to teach its students about the same laws as other schools. This often means using state laws as examples. It only makes sense to teach about the laws of the state the school is located. This same sort of rivalry can be seen in universities in general (such as Iowa/Iowa State or Michigan/Michigan State).

This is not to say it makes absolutely no difference where you go to law school, but, again, it depends on your plans and goals. Graduating at the bottom of your class at Harvard may open more doors for you than graduating at the

top of your class at Wossamotta U. (This is a little different than what my former student suggested in the response to the previous question.) Whether you learn more at one school than another is largely up to you. You may have access to better facilities (library, computer system, support staff) at larger or more well-known schools, but how much you learn depends more on how motivated you are.

The reputation of a law school can make a difference when you are job hunting. Many schools are only known in their local region. Employers in the area a law school is located will know the reputation of the law school. Employers outside the area may not, and you will be more of an unknown quantity. This is where the biggest difference between local and national law schools occurs. You may get as good an education at Iowa as at Harvard, but Iowa is less well known outside the Midwest. Thus, the selection of some law schools could very well tie you to a particular region for employment purposes, at least initially.

Several years ago, a representative of placement services for the UI Law School was on a panel discussion I attended. When asked whether attending law school in a particular region would limit employment opportunities to that region, she responded by noting that several top law firms send representatives to the UI for recruitment. This is true, but it does not tell the whole story. First, her job was to promote the UI Law School. She obviously wanted top UI undergrads to stay here (thus improving the reputation of Iowa's law school) rather than leaving for more prestigious law schools. Second, when these top firms recruit, they primarily recruit from the top ten percent of the class. Those in the top ten percent of their class will obviously have greater mobility when it comes time to find a job no matter where they go to law school. The other 90 percent, however, do not have such mobility and will be more likely to find jobs in the region where their law school is located. Some books, including the *Official Guide*, have information on how many of a law school's graduates had jobs shortly after graduation, and what types of jobs the graduates had (e.g., government, private practice, firm, solo practice).

If a school is accredited you need not worry too much about the quality of the school (at least in terms of being able to take a bar exam). Quality may be more of a concern if the school is quite new or is on probation for one reason or another. If you are unsure whether a law school is accredited and the school's literature does not say whether it is, ask. A good way to see how well a law school does in preparing its students to practice law, is to check the number of its graduates that pass the bar exam on the first attempt. If the grads of a particular school consistently do more poorly, you should find out why. It may be that there are two law schools in the state and the top students attend school A, so school B's scores will be lower, but it may be something more serious. Some of this information is in the *Official Guide* and you should be able to find out more by contacting the law school or the state bar association of the state where the law school is located.

You should apply to at least four or five law schools (unless you are certain of getting into the one school you want). Of these, pick one to which you are almost certain of being admitted (your safety school), two or more which you would like to attend and are relatively certain of getting into, and one or more which you would really like to attend if you can get in (your dream school). This will give you some variety and increase your chances of at least getting in somewhere.

Application fees for law schools range from about \$30 to \$80. Thus, applying to five or more schools can run into some serious money, but think of it as an investment. Even if you do not go to a particular law school, you want to apply to enough schools to make sure you get into at least one of them. Coming up with the money may be hard, but consider the consequences if you only apply to one or two law schools and are not accepted. If you really cannot afford the application fee, write to the school and perhaps they will waive the fee. Many schools have programs that allow them to waive application fees for minority or other students. It does not hurt to ask if a law school will waive the application fee for one reason or another.

You may find additional information about a law school by purchasing a book that profiles various law schools. (I recommend the *Official Guide*, which is put out yearly by the folks who administer the LSAT. Other books are useful, but this is a good starting point.) Such books give you capsule summaries of each law school. Some books will also rate the schools and other aspects of the community. (The *U.S News & World Report* is known for its rankings. The specific URL sometimes changes, but you can get to it from the home page, www.usnews.com.) If you do not have a definite idea where you want to go, this type of book can be helpful. In addition, these books usually list the person to contact about admissions, deadlines for applications, and financial aid.

When should I take the LSAT? When should I apply to the law schools?

The LSAT is offered four times during the year: June, October, December, and February. You should take the LSAT no later than fall semester of your senior year. Many of my students take the October test, but it would be better to take it during the June administration at the end of your junior year. If you take it earlier, it gives you time to retake it if necessary. Do not plan on having to retake the LSAT, and do not worry about it, but things do happen. You may be sick on the day of the exam, someone in your family may have a medical emergency, or you may simply oversleep. Plan ahead. By taking the test in June you will have more time to consider the schools to apply to when you see your results. In addition, if you decide to retake the LSAT, taking it again in October will still get your scores to the law schools early in the admissions "season." Given the three to four weeks before results are available, taking the test in December or February will cause your application to be fairly late.

You should have a pretty good idea of where you want to apply to law school by the end of your junior year. Get applications from these schools, for the year you want to start, as soon as they are available (usually September or October). Check the materials to see what deadlines you must meet. You particularly need to know when your application file has to be complete and when they will inform you of their decision. You should start mailing out the applications by the middle of the fall semester of your senior year. This will give you time to be sure your file is complete well before the deadline. (If you graduate at the end of the Fall or Summer semesters, you may want to see if you can begin law school mid-year or during a summer session instead of waiting until the next fall, but few law schools allow this.) Remember your application file contains your application, LSAT scores, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and any other materials the school requests. It takes time to get all these materials together, especially the letters, so start early.

I mentioned two items in the preceding paragraph that I have not explained yet: transcripts and LSAT scores. Law schools want to see your undergraduate transcripts. For a small fee you can arrange to have the registrar's office mail copies of your transcripts to the schools you want. The transcripts must come directly from the registrar, do not send them yourself. LSDAS (Law School Data Assembly Service) now sends your transcripts to the law schools for you. You still need to have the registrar's office send a certified copy to LSDAS, but this is easier than having to arrange for transcripts to be sent to several schools.

After you take the LSAT, you get your scores back. You must send these scores to the schools to which you are applying. You can sign up for a service (LSDAS) which sends the scores to the schools you want (for a fee of course). If you know the schools in which you are interested at the time you take the LSAT, you can sign up then and the scores will be sent as soon as they are available. If you do not know, you can wait and tell LSDAS where to send the scores later.

What does it mean when a law school uses a "rolling admissions" policy?

It used to be that law schools would have an application deadline and wait until that deadline had passed before making admission decisions. This procedure was difficult for both applicants and law school administrators. As a result, law schools now use a rolling admissions system. Under a rolling admissions system, a law school will begin to make admissions decisions after receiving a substantial number of applications. Very strong applicants are immediately accepted and very weak ones rejected. Ones in the middle are put on hold and may not find out the school's decision until late spring. (Some of these folks are put on what is known as a waiting list, which means they must wait until some other students reject the offer of admission before they can be made an offer.) The advantage of rolling admissions for applicants is that many will know sooner whether they have been accepted to a school and can plan accordingly. Even for wait-listed applicants the process should be faster because the school is waiting to hear from fewer applicants at the end of the application season. (The opinion in *Hopwood v. Texas* mentioned above contains details on how the University of Texas used rolling admissions for its law school.)

If a law school uses rolling admissions, you are better off if you get your application in early. This means you should also take the LSAT early enough (e.g., June before your senior year) to have your scores to the schools when they begin sorting applications. Law schools will not process your application until your file is complete, including required letters, transcripts, statements, and so on.

How do I sign up for the LSAT?

Not surprisingly, these days the application process is done electronically and LSAC no longer prints an LSAT Information Book. Go to the LSAC website (www.lsac.org) and look over the information contained there. If you

are ready to sign up for the LSAT you will first need to set up a secure account. Among other information on the website, you can learn LSAT dates and places for the coming year. You can obtain a free practice test and order other past tests for study purposes.

How do I get an application for a law school?

Again, these days most of the application process is done electronically. For the most part, you should be able to get a school's application by downloading it from the law school's website. The addresses (web and regular) for all ABA-approved law schools are contained in various online materials (and books). The listed addresses are often to the law school and your request for an application might get a bit faster response if it is directed to the specific office. The LSAC website may list more specific addresses, as well as email addresses, web site URLs, and phone numbers.

Law school applications should be filled out as neatly as possible. The forms can usually be filled out online, or by downloading a form and filling it out on your computer before printing. Doing your law school applications online with LSAC allows you to answer common questions once and the program enters the information on the various forms. Once the forms are complete you can just print them on your own printer.

What should I do to prepare to take the LSAT?

My understanding was that "LSAT" originally stood for "Law School Aptitude Test." Standardized tests are often criticized. Some years ago the LSAT and other standardized tests were specifically criticized for whether they were really measuring aptitude. As a result, the "A" now stands for "Admission." The test is still an important part of the admissions process, but the organization that administers the test makes fewer claims about what the LSAT measures. Even so, the basic purpose of the LSAT is still to test your aptitude for successfully attending law school. (Aptitude, by the way, means your general ability to reason and analyze material. Getting good grades is not necessarily an indication of this aptitude—learning the material and challenging yourself are.) It does not test you on specific knowledge about law, government, or politics (see the question above about course work). After three or more years of undergraduate study you should be adequately prepared to take the test. Nevertheless, many people feel they need more preparation, and many other people make money as a result.

You can sign up for an entire LSAT preparation course offered by a private company (e.g., Kaplan), or just buy one of several test preparation books that are available at most bookstores. With certain exceptions, I am skeptical as to the value of such prep courses. The information booklet for the LSAT contains a sample test, use it to prepare for the LSAT. As I indicated earlier, you cannot specifically study for the LSAT, but you can prepare yourself for the format of the test and familiarize yourself with the types of questions. When you take the practice test, do so under the same conditions as the LSAT, particularly with respect to the time limits for completing each section. This will help you to feel more comfortable with the testing environment.

To further familiarize yourself with the testing environment, try to sign up for the test at your own university. Trying to find your way around another town and campus on test day will only increase your stress level. Try to visit the test site before the test so you have no trouble finding it the day of the test. If you can, actually go into the room where the test will be given. The more familiar you are with the location, the more comfortable and relaxed you will be during the test.

Some people have test anxiety, or just do not do well on multiple choice tests. The primary value of preparation courses and books, as I see it, is to help you relieve this anxiety. If you will feel more comfortable by taking a course or buying a book, do it. You can accomplish the same result, low anxiety, by not putting additional pressure on yourself to achieve unrealistic test scores. (Of course, this may be easier said than done.)

The cost for preparation courses and programs varies widely. I have heard of prices as high as \$2000 for these courses. Online courses can also run from \$600 to over \$1000. Short courses or correspondence courses may be as little as \$200. The people who run these courses claim their students do better *on average* (if you sign up for one of these courses make sure there is a guarantee of some sort) than those who do not take their courses. I am suspicious of any claims that taking a particular preparation course *causes* better test scores. It could be that those who take such prep courses are more serious or better students in the first place. The differences are not that large (but, admittedly, even small increases may make a difference in some cases).

LSAT preparation books usually cost about \$25. There are several varieties. Some contain extensive strategies for taking the test, others simply contain practice tests. One student told me many of the practice tests in the book he purchased were nothing like the actual LSAT. It may be difficult to tell whether a book has tests like the actual LSAT, but there are two main ways to be sure you can see the real thing. First, the *LSAT & LSDAS Registration & Information Book* you use to sign up for the LSAT contains an official LSAT practice test. You can use this practice test as a guide for checking the tests in other books. Second, you can buy books of past LSATs from LSAC. (These come in books of 10, or three, or individual tests.) You can contact the Law School Admissions Council on the web at www.lsac.org to find out how to obtain their books and other materials.

In preparing for the test you might do the following. Take the practice test contained in the *Information Book*. If you feel you need more preparation, order the prep test book from Law Services. If you still feel you need more preparation look at other books or prep courses. You might want to take the LSAT once before paying \$1300 or more for a prep course. Of course, this means you need to begin preparing well in advance, and leave yourself enough time to take the test again if necessary. (On the other hand, you may not want to take the chance of having a bad first test score because law schools are sent *all* your LSAT scores. See the next question.)

Another exception to my feeling about preparation books involves the analytical reasoning (logic puzzles) found in the test. This type of reasoning is usually developed in math and related courses, but for some reason, many students planning on law school do not have very good math backgrounds, or have not had a math or related course for years. The logic puzzles in the LSAT are not overly difficult, but if you have not seen story or logic problems in several years, it is worth your time to refresh yourself before the test. If you take the sample test in the information booklet first, you can get an idea of how much additional preparation you need for the analytical reasoning section and the rest of the test.

Is the LSAT ever offered at special times, locations, or under different circumstances?

There are three things to mention here. First, most of the regular administrations of the LSAT are on Saturdays, but those who worship on Saturday can make special arrangements to take the LSAT on the Monday following that Saturday administration. See the registration book for details.

Second, if one does not live near a published test site, you can request the test be given at an alternate site. There is, however, no guarantee that an alternative site will be available. Again, see the registration book for details.

Third, accommodations may also be available for persons with disabilities. Law Services indicates that one may be required to "submit the results of a psychoeducational or neuropsychological battery of tests." Law Services also indicates that "If you receive additional test time as an accommodation for your disability LSAC will send a statement with your LSDAS Law School Reports advising that your score(s) should be interpreted with great sensitivity and flexibility." In addition, scores earned with additional test time are not averaged with other scores and percentile ranks are not given. A lot of people might do better on the LSAT if given more time. That basically makes the timed nature of the test an important part of it. Being given additional time for the test will set your scores apart from everyone else's, which may or may not be a good thing. In general, I recommend against requesting additional time if you can avoid it. If you need the extra time, then ask for it and do not worry about it. On the other hand, if the problem is relatively "mild," perhaps one can use certain strategies to minimize the problem during the test. I have, for example, helped two of my students diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder prepare for the regular timed test and both did quite well. (One scored in the 99th percentile.) The advantage of taking the regular timed test is that one can then use it as a point of discussion in law school applications. For example, I made specific mention in the letters of recommendation for my students of their taking the timed version.

Should I take the LSAT again if I do not do well?

This is a difficult question to answer, in part because "not doing well" is relative to your plans. If you plan to apply to one of the top law schools, or need to compensate for a low GPA, one or two more points may make the difference. Law Services (the folks who administer the LSAT) reports that scores on retakes are slightly higher (about 2 points) on average. The increase is primarily due to a familiarity factor. In other words, you do better on the test the second time because you are more familiar with the structure and format of the test. You can also increase your familiarity with the test by taking practice tests found in the information booklet and other books containing actual past tests. Keep in mind, however, that the slightly higher second test scores are an average and

some people actually score lower on the retake. Large increases on retakes are routinely reviewed by Law Services. In addition, the law schools receiving your LSAT score will also see your score for any previous times you took the test. Law Services advises law schools that the average of your scores is probably closest to being an accurate reflection of your abilities. (A former student a few years out of law school sent me comments indicating that law schools now tend to just take the higher of the LSAT scores. A few schools specifically say this in their materials. Others may use it as an unofficial policy.) If there are large differences, you should explain them in a cover letter to the law schools (e.g., illness on the first test day). Given all this, unless you think you will do substantially better the next time it may not be worthwhile to retake. It is better to do it right the first time.

Note: You can cancel your LSAT score within six calendar days of taking the test. If you were sick or for some other reason just know you did poorly (one of my students did the dreaded skipping of an item on the answer sheet and did not have time to go back and fix it) you can just cancel the test. My understanding is that the law schools will see that you canceled the prior test, and you will still have to explain it in your applications, but at least you will not have a bad score on your record.

Should I go on a campus visit?

If you have the time and money it is a good idea. One of my students told me that an admissions officer told him that it is more difficult to turn someone down who has been on a campus visit. What I think the admissions officer meant is that a campus visit by a prospective student allows the admissions officer to put a face and personality with the application file. In essence, a campus visit may be another way to set yourself apart from all the other applicants you are competing against for a spot in the entering class. (Of course, if everyone went on a campus visit it would be less useful as a way to distinguish yourself.)

A campus visit will also give you some idea of the area where you may be spending the next three (or more) years. You should find out about the cost of living, housing, parking, public transportation, and other things about the city. If you are married, you will need to find out about educational or work opportunities for your spouse. This will also give you a chance to see the campus, but remember, you are going to law school for what is inside the buildings, not what is on the outside (i.e., the scenery). If you go on a visit, try to find out about things they do not tell you in the informational literature the school sends to applicants. To give you an idea of the community in which the law school is located you can look at a book called *Places Rated Almanac*. This book contains information on all communities in the United States with a population over 50,000.

What are the interviews like?

A (very) few schools conduct personal interviews of the applicants. Undoubtedly, this is done after the first cut. The schools that use interviews do so due to the large number of qualified applicants for a very limited number of openings. It is simply another chance for the school to evaluate you. I have no personal experience with interviews so I cannot specifically say what to expect. Nevertheless, the process is much like interviewing for a job. You should comport yourself with the dignity expected of the professional you hope to become. You will probably be asked why you want to go to law school, why you want to go to their law school, what your plans and goals are, and so on. Think about how you will answer these questions ahead of time. Do not memorize your answers, but do have something to say (oral communication skills again). In addition, have some *intelligent* questions to ask the interviewer(s). You can ask about facilities, instructors, course offerings, placement, bar passage rates, and many other topics. If you just are not ready to get a job, it may not be wise to say so quite that bluntly. Do not lie or make up something, but do not be flip either. If you have to go through an interview, it means you are in competition with other highly qualified applicants. If you appear indifferent, you will not make it. This will be a situation where developed oral communication skills give you an advantage.

Estrich talks about interviews and makes two main points. First, be polite and professional with everyone you meet. Impressions you make with everyone you meet will likely be remembered, for good or bad. Second, do your homework. Know things about the school so that you can ask good questions and speak intelligently about the school.

When will I know if I am admitted?

Usually, you will find out by late March or early April, though with rolling admissions I have known students who were admitted as early as November (and some as late as July). If a school uses rolling admissions you may find out sooner. The schools often give you two weeks to decide on their offer of admission. If you say no, they will

offer a spot to someone else. Obviously, if you are that someone else, you will be notified later. If you have sent out several applications, you may not hear from all of them at the same time. If your second choice accepts you, but you have not heard from your first choice, call the first choice to find out the status of your application. You might ask for an extension on the decision deadline from your second choice. Do not let yourself get caught in a paperwork squeezeplay.

If you face a situation in which you will not know about your number one choice until after the deadline for your number two choice, you might do the following. Most schools ask you for a deposit (non-refundable) to let them know you plan to attend. This is only fair really. They need to know which people they have accepted are actually going to come to their school. If you turn them down, they can offer the slot to someone else. If you are, in fact, willing to go to the second choice if the first does not come through, go ahead and send them the deposit. If you are later accepted by the first choice, then you can consider switching. You may lose your deposit, but consider it an option you purchased to guarantee a slot in the first year class of your second choice. Hopefully, you will receive word from your first choice before you have made other, more substantial, financial commitments to the second choice.

What is an "Early Decision" program? Should I sign up for it?

A few years ago one of my students told me about the University of Chicago's Early Decision program. You can read about the program here:

www.law.uchicago.edu/prospective/applyjd/early

The basics of the program are that the applicant asks to be put into an early decision track. The materials indicate that those in the ED track will receive a decision by the end of December (for admission the following fall). The materials also indicate that some who are not offered admission as part of the ED program will be reevaluated during the regular admissions process, but my guess is that the chances will be slim once the admissions committee has initially rejected you. If you sign the ED agreement and are admitted to the Chicago law school, you must commit to attending and immediately withdraw your applications to any other law schools. The implication, though the agreement contains plenty of hedge language, is that you will have a bit of an advantage if you sign the ED agreement.

When I first read about this program I found it a bit odd. My suspicion is that Chicago is basically trying to keep from being abandoned when someone is offered admission at Harvard or Yale later in the year. I also suspect that to the extent that the schools are sharing admission info they may be in violation of certain anti-trust laws. (Your first lawsuit!)

For the most part, the ED program will only be an issue if you are also applying to other top law schools (Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Berkeley) and have a reasonable shot at getting into them. Of course, that does not apply to many people, but let me discuss the situation with respect to Chicago and then explain why it might be important for everyone else as well.

The first thing to keep in mind is that most schools use rolling admissions and you might be notified before the end of December anyway. (I know students who have received admit or reject decisions from schools in November.) Also, if you get in early at Chicago you have to pull your applications elsewhere, so you would not know about, for example, Harvard unless they notified you early. Thus, one option might be to make sure your materials are complete at Harvard (or elsewhere) as early as possible and then submit to Chicago's early program by the deadline. That would maximize the time your other applications were under consideration elsewhere before you might have to pull them due to being accepted at Chicago.

Another point is that if you seriously think that you'll get into Harvard (etc.), then it is probably likely that you would also get into Chicago as well and would not need an early decision.

All that said, it may really be a matter of where you want to go. There are certainly differences between Chicago and Harvard, or between any other schools. You undoubtedly selected the schools to which you applied for particular reasons. If you followed my advice above, you likely applied to a combination of schools (dream school, good-shot schools, safety school). The question is whether you would be willing to give up a chance at a dream

school if you get into one of your good-shot schools. Given the way the Chicago materials hedged on whether there is any advantage to signing the early decision agreement, I am not sure this is a good tradeoff.

Although the University of Chicago's early decision program and agreement is the first one I have heard of, other schools may give it a try if it works there. Just as Chicago may be unhappy to lose students to Harvard and Yale late in the year, the same will be true for the other schools who then lose their students to Chicago, and so on down the line. The odd thing about this is that schools could just as easily put a deadline on the acceptance decision when they send out the letter. In fact, that is the way law schools used to do it. In my case, for example, my number two school offered me admission and gave me only two weeks to decide. Schools moved away from such deadlines when they went to rolling admissions, so they are apparently looking for an alternative to get students to actually commit to the school quickly. It is hard to say whether this approach will work, but you might see it being used at more schools and should be prepared for it.

Do you have any other general advice?

I'm actually using this question as a place to include some additional advice from a former student. Some of her points were covered previously, but her comments hit on several issues and I wanted to keep them together. This former student went to Georgetown for law school and had been practicing law for several years, mostly in public interest law, before passing along her comments. I've edited her message a bit and have included a few additional comments of my own (in italics) following each of her points.

1) Undergrads need to think about debt a lot. I was very fortunate to get a scholarship at Georgetown, but I still had to borrow to pay for housing, books, and living expenses for 3 years, which was over \$60,000. Many of my friends have debts over \$100,000. I also assumed I would be fine because Georgetown has a generous loan repayment program, and there is now federal assistance with loan repayment for students who work in the public interest. However, the federal program requires 10 years of qualifying employment, which is a huge commitment, especially for women who may want to take time off to start families, or people who eventually want to go into private practice. Also, what you may think of as public interest may not qualify (e.g., a small firm that fights housing discrimination but is not a 501(c)(3)). And while loan repayment is great, it doesn't do anything to help those attorneys who might be working at smaller firms or even in solo practice who aren't making lots of money. Of course, students can choose to go to Iowa or other less expensive schools, and that may be worth it. *I didn't mention much about financing law school, but this can also be an important consideration. I generally recommend that folks go to the best law school they can, but clearly the cost will be a factor. On the other hand, if you get accepted at a top law school, it's possible that lower-ranked, but very good schools may be willing to offer more in the way of financial aid or scholarships to have you go there. I've had a couple of students who could have gotten into top law schools, but who still went to the UI because they were given very good financial aid packages.*

2) However, if students do want to go to fancy schools, the U of Iowa education can give them an advantage. I got my scholarship in part to promote diversity in our class, which includes geographical as well as racial. We had plenty of Harvard and Yale grads, but I was the only Iowa student in my class that year. *"Diversity" is usually associated with race, ethnicity, and gender, but in a more general sense it also includes a desire on the part of law schools to have students from a variety of backgrounds and educational experiences. Thus, "national" law schools such as Georgetown like to have folks from different areas of the country. The schools also like to have students with many different educational backgrounds. This can include different colleges (private and public, large and small, etc.), but also different majors. In other words, they don't just want all Political Science and History majors. This is another reason it might be a good idea to pick up a second major in something that's a bit different from what might be considered the usual prelaw majors.*

3) Everyone should take time off between undergrad and law if they can. Some people need that time to realize that they don't really want to do law. Also, if you are doing anything at all interesting, it will boost your application. I did Americorps, and it definitely made me more competitive, especially since I could pull on my experiences to write a great personal statement. There is another program at Georgetown called the Public Interest Law Scholars (PILS) that I was fortunate enough to be a part of. Among the 10 PILS in my class, I had the least real world experience, and it showed. Some of the people who had been out for awhile had trouble adjusting to school, but most were extra focused. As a bonus, their pre law school activities often gave them an advantage in competing for internships and even post law school jobs. *I agree completely. More*

than ever it seems that taking one or two years off before law school really makes a difference (again, assuming you are doing something interesting--or if you can spin it that way!). As I asked at the very start of this FAQ, folks sometimes need to really think about whether going to law school is the right thing for them. Assuming the answer is yes, it's still a good idea to take some time off to get some experience. Such experience will help to put a lot of what you are learning in law school into better context. It may also help you to be a little more focused. Giving up a job and paycheck to return to law school, tends to make one a bit more focused on doing well.

4) I agree that science majors are very useful, although I didn't pursue that path. I think foreign language skills can also be important. Of course, I'm in immigration so I'm biased, but it also helps with international law, criminal, family, and others. *I'll still push at least having some math/science courses. Even in immigration law, issues about racial profiling or disparate impact may get one into statistical studies and lawyers need to understand them, and be able to explain them to others (clients, jurors, etc.). I think language skills are also becoming more important. Clearly they are if one plans to go into some type of international law, if one is planning on an area such as immigration law, or if one plans to practice in border states such as Texas, etc. That said, knowing Spanish, in particular, can be very important in plenty of nonborder states, Iowa included. The UI requires two years of a foreign language, so that's certainly a step in the right direction. I know, however, that a lot of students go to Kirkwood Community College for their language courses. This may or may not be a good idea. The bottom line here may be to think about the language requirement as more of an investment for your later legal work rather than just something to check off for your college requirements.*

5) During law school, I would encourage students to do as many clinics or externships as they can without destroying their grades. This is especially important for those who want to work in the nonprofit or government sector. My first employer never asked to see my transcript but focused on relevant volunteer experience. Of course, that's an extreme example, but the experience helped me both get the job, and when I first started. *One version of a common saying is that law school teaches you the law, but not how to get to the courthouse. The idea is that law school doesn't necessarily teach students the more practical aspects of the legal profession. This has changed a lot over the years, but the point my former student is making is that as a law student you need to take advantage of these opportunities. Employers may be more interested in your experience rather than your transcript. At one level, this is because they have to train you to do the job and the more experience you have the less training will be necessary.*

6) Regarding taking courses with an eye to the bar—I enrolled in an unconventional first year curriculum which didn't necessarily prepare me for the bar. But my Barbri course [a bar review course] taught me everything I needed to know, so I don't regret not focusing specifically on the bar. *Most law schools have a set first-year curriculum. Schools that are more concerned about establishing themselves (either in terms of reputation or accreditation) may have a more extensive list of required courses aimed at helping to make sure their graduates pass the bar. Full bar review courses can probably get a person by some of the technical information (such as filing deadlines for that state), but I would urge caution about opting out of courses often seen as preparation for the bar exam. It's certainly true that if, for example, you take a property class (which is usually required in the first year) you will certainly need to know a lot more about property law if you plan to practice in that area. Even if you don't plan to practice in that area, if a property case comes across your desk you will have a better foundation on which to approach preparation for the case if you've had that course in law school.*

7) Due to some personal troubles, I had some isolated bad grades in undergrad, but I was able to submit a supplemental statement which I think helped a great deal. Writing such statements is very delicate because you have to straddle the line between taking responsibility while trying to mitigate the fact that you have a bad grade. But it can be done, although I think it is less likely to work the more bad grades there are. Also, acing the LSAT helps convince schools you can perform. *One or two bad grades probably aren't worth commenting on, but a bad semester or year, or some other problem might make it worth submitting the supplemental statement. I agree that the key is to take responsibility and indicate how you've gotten past the problem. One way to do this is by showing that, for example, after a bad first year your grades have improved dramatically. If the problem occurs in your last year of undergrad, it might be a good reason to take one or two years off to establish a strong work record to mitigate undergrad problems. A strong LSAT score will help a lot here, but, as I noted in the sections above, the LSAT isn't something you can study for and most folks don't need more pressure to get a particular score.*

Is there anything else I should know?

Probably, but this should cover the basics. I hope this handout covers most of the questions you may have, or at least enough of them to get you started. I now have this handout available on the web at www.uiowa.edu/~030116 (follow the Advising/Prelaw links). I have already mentioned that Law Services is on the web at www.lsac.org. Law schools now have web pages and you can undoubtedly find other information by searching the web.

On the first page of this FAQ I suggested that you talk to others about law school. One should, however, take some care in doing so. Some folks have distinct biases that, intentionally or not, affect their view (e.g., the alumnus who is pushing his alma mater, the placement director pushing her law school). Others may simply not be able to give good advice for your particular situation. Getting information from as many sources as possible will help you to get a clearer picture of what advice will work for you and your particular situation.

In addition to speaking to various people, you can also get information from some of the many books that are available. Some books involve personal experiences and others are more how-to. The how-to books may focus on a specific aspect (such as writing a personal statement) or cover the entire process. I have mentioned several books in this FAQ. For convenience I will list them again here:

Estrich, Susan, *How to Get into Law School*

Law School Admissions Council, *ABA-LSAC Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools* (new edition every year)

Lax, Rick, *Lawyer Boy*

Lermack, Mark, *How to Get Into the Right Law School*

Martinson, Thomas H., and David P. Waldherr, *Getting Into Law School Today*

Moll, Richard, *The Lure of the Law* (currently out of print, but used copies may be available)

Simenhoff, Mark, *My First Year as a Lawyer* (currently out of print, but used copies may be available)

Turow, Scott, *One L*