

LAW SCHOOL

ESSAY EXAMPLES:

Making Your Statements Memorable



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Introduction

In these pages you will find examples of what to do—and what not to do—when writing personal statements, diversity statements, and addenda in a law school application. These are actual essays from actual PowerScore Admissions Consulting students, and the “after” results were achieved after students worked with a PowerScore Admissions Consultant to refine their theme, topic, approach, and verbiage.

The first “before” and “after” pair is a general law school personal statement. The second “before” and “after” pair is a law school application diversity statement. The third pair is a response to the question “Why do you want to attend Duke Law?”

In each of these instances, the student came to PowerScore requesting assistance fine-tuning their overall approach and writing. Each time, we spoke with the student at length, took the main themes and topics from each essay, and polished them to ensure that the focus was on the correct elements, that the timeline was engaging, and that the student was presented in the best way possible. We also made sure to clarify any confusing points, guard against brusque language, and thoroughly proof each final version to ensure that the quality of the essays was impeccable.



BEFORE: Personal Statement

I sat on a torn vinyl chair as the tube lighting in the office flickered and crackled. The man on the other side of the desk sat down and said he had about 15 minutes to diagnose my future. As the high school guidance counselor, he had a long line of students waiting to be informed of their worth, and he did not want to keep them waiting. He looked at some notes he had written on yellow lined paper and suggested I become a carpenter. It would be the logical choice, he explained. "I've been doing this for 23 years," he said. "Be realistic." It was 2001, and the economy in Smalltown, Illinois was struggling. I walked out into the cold December air and the sun reflected blindingly against the snow and salt-stained streets. I weighed the choices in my head as the pressure built with each step I took in the stale, crunchy snow: accept my future or revolutionize it.

I packed my bags, \$700, two suits and a determination to evolve. My moment of punctuated equilibrium had arrived; I ended my high school education prematurely and stepped onto the other side as someone who had the potential and tenacity to make something of myself.

The tension on the Bank of Montreal trading floor was visible as the international desk looked at me with a pensive gaze. I was 27, and the treasury of a multinational investment bank depended upon my technical architecture for a billion dollars in daily trades. We'd know as soon as the Federal Reserve Chairman finished his next sentence; would my solution handle the explosion in trade volume? My technical career had grown rapidly. I had morphed from a computer salesperson five years prior to an IT architecture and risk leader for Fortune 500 companies.

The momentum had taken a toll. My 28 year old body was tired and my hair thinning from the stress of 80 hour work weeks. The audible thud of the latest M&A deal landing on my desk was matched by the trepidation of 70 employees looking at me, as if to say, "Can we still go home for Christmas?" I could relate to my employees' exhaustion; at times, I felt that without the proper academic education, I was constantly pushing the world up a slope. Passion and determination came naturally to me, but after \$750 million in M&A work in 2007 alone, the constant shattering of glass ceilings were cutting me to pieces. I had to help myself. I again entered the chrysalis, this time as a 27-year old high school dropout with a double Windsor noosed to my neck and a need for metamorphosis. Two years earlier I had beat the odds and graduated from SCU with a degree in Poli.Sci. without a high school diploma.

Going to law school is my next step, however the law has always been with me. I was 12 years old when I requested a license from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work with migratory birds. Ever since I was a small child I had a passion for birds of prey and was curious why they were so scarce at the time, which in turn yielded a burning desire to conduct studies, perform rehabilitation and introduce laws to end certain pesticides, avicides and deforestation practices. I was told it would take an act of Congress for a minor to become licensed, and two years later, at the age of 14, after two years of lobbying to numerous members of the Illinois legislature, I became the youngest individual permitted to work with birds of prey, conduct banding activities and work for a rehabilitation center in the history of the Illinois Department of Conservation. It took an act of Congress. Throughout my professional career in business, my passion for the law bubbled below, percolating up in unexpected places. I was invited to Cuba to teach conservation techniques and to recommend regulatory practices to the nation's biologists and ornithologists and, in 2008, I was asked to advise Ontario's Madame Secretary of the Interior on conservation legislation. However, I am no longer content being the systems architect, M&A whiz kid, or Chief Security Officer.

My evolutionary peak became clear to me as one of the primary security managers for the nation's largest healthcare information technology company. I was leading all legal and regulatory teams for our products and services, eliminating risks inherent in one-third of the nation's electronic medical records and electronic prescriptions. I had not only implemented policies and delivered solutions that would withstand scrutiny, I had become one of the top legal authorities within the largest healthcare technology firm in America — the law does not have to lay below.

I have transformed. One day, almost 17 years ago, I chose to be unrealistic and my life has taken a unique and determined course ever since. It has been characterized by seemingly rapid bursts of progression, but, looking back, it was persistence and tenacity that propelled me upwards through a world of business, technology and law. I hope to bring these traits with me to Duke Law, Completing my studies will be the greatest thrust forward in my life personally and professionally, and it will allow me to realize my aptitude as attorney and, once again, transform.

AFTER: Personal Statement

The tube lighting in the office flickered and crackled. The man on the other side of the desk sat down on a torn vinyl chair and said he had about 15 minutes to diagnose my future. He looked at some notes he had written on yellow lined paper, cleared his throat, and suggested I become a carpenter. "I've been a high school counselor for 23 years," he said. "You have to be realistic." It would be the logical choice, he went on. It was 2001, and the economy in Smalltown, Illinois was struggling. Without a word, I got up and walked out of his office and into the cold December air, my eyes wincing at the sun's blinding reflection against the snow and salt-stained streets. With each step I took in the stale, crunchy snow, the pressure in my head increased, even as my choices decreased. Eventually, only two thoughts remained: I either had to accept my future—or revolutionize it.

I refused to believe that fifteen minutes in a counselor's office had settled my fate or that my hometown had shackled me to an existence I couldn't even fathom. Unwilling to accept the bleak predeterminations set in motion by my upbringing and circumstances, I packed my bags, hastily scraped together \$700, bought two ill-fitting suits and threw caution to the wind. I was seventeen years old, homeless, and without a high school diploma.

My story should end there, but it doesn't—not by a long shot.

I bounced around all over the country, getting rides from strangers and walking hundreds of miles, for 8 months before finally talking my way into a retail position selling computers in Anytown, South Carolina. I didn't know anything about computers, but it was a way to make ends meet. On a sunny Tuesday morning, a man came into the store and he strode purposefully towards me. "Do you know anyone who understands TCP/IP?" he asked. "I need someone to do some telecommunications networking for me." Without stopping to wonder what TCP/IP was, I confidently said, "I understand it. How can I help you?" Shocked at my own brazenness, I felt myself leave my body and float above the two of us, the buzzing in my ears barely allowing me to hear the man asking me to meet with him and his associates to discuss my abilities. I spent the next week in the library, feverishly reading anything I could get my hands on about the topic. Ten days later, I not only met with the man and his associates, but was also awarded my first technology contract—for the Fortune 500 company, Abbot Laboratories.

Time whirled past, and I found my technological knowledge increasing and being sought out by other Fortune 500 firms. In five years, I had morphed from computer salesman into technology expert—I was a 22-year-old boasting the title of *technical architect*, creating technological plans and efficiency recommendations for billion-

dollar corporations, making million-dollar decisions, and working with industry giants like Microsoft and Cisco Technologies on a day-to-day basis, looking to increase companies' world-wide productivity and profit. I had also, in that time, obtained a GED, enrolled in South Carolina University, and was only a few credits shy of being awarded a degree in Political Science (with a minor in Computer Engineering) from SCU. I was determined not to let my bleak upbringing hold me back.

Fast forward five more years. I had obtained my college degree and continued expanding my expertise in computing and security. I was now working at Scripts, Inc. as their lead technological advisor for mergers and acquisitions. I had gone from creating the technical architecture for companies to creating the companies themselves, working 80-hour weeks, driving myself to work better, harder, faster. In 2007, my team and I handled \$750 million in M&A work alone. I led all legal and regulatory aspects for the software that was in one out of every three doctor's offices in America. I dealt with complex HIPAA regulations, implementing policies and crafting solutions that protected one-third of the nation's electronic medical records and electronic prescriptions. Although the rise was exhilarating, the sheer momentum of my seemingly meteoric ascent had taken its toll. I was 27 years old with creaking joints and thinning hair. The overextended look in the eyes of each member of my 70-person team was mirrored in my own eyes and I knew the reason: although passion and determination came naturally to me, I was still missing something essential, something all others in my position had. I needed more education. I had become one of the most powerful legal authorities within the largest healthcare technology firm in America—and all without a law degree. As many glass ceilings as I had shattered, I still had to push the heft of my academic shortcomings up the hill of professional success—my own personal Sisyphean task, slowly yet inexorably draining me and my potential. This had to change if I truly wanted to accomplish all I set out to do.

Going to law school is my next, logical step. I can see the writing on the wall much like I did that frigid December morning in my high school counselor's office, and want to plow that hill before I have to heave my future up it again. Through sheer determination I have transformed myself countless times, and will continue to do so. Nine years ago I chose to defy my odds, to be unrealistic, and my life has taken a unique, incredible, and determined course ever since. My ride seems a whirlwind, almost as if I were propelled by outside forces. Looking back, though, it was my own persistence and tenacity that propelled me upwards, shattering through the glass ceilings in the worlds of business, technology, and even law. I will bring these traits with me to Duke Law—I don't know any other way to be. With a degree from Duke Law I will metamorphose, thrust my life forward and, once again, transform.

BEFORE: Diversity Statement

Writing a diversity statement has probably been the most challenging part of my law school application. I had initially started my essay discussing my pride as a Minorcan, a descendent of Hispanic slaves that founded the New Smyrna colony in Florida in two centuries ago. As interesting and compelling as those hardships may have been, as is the amazing story of their flight from injustice and their liberation by the Governor of St. Augustine, those aspects of diversity do not really tell you anything about me as a person trying to support why I should be admitted when the statistics say I have a 5.66% chance.

What is my personal story of diversity? I asked myself how my own adversity would lend any credence to my application and literally hundreds of defining moments in my life flashed through my cerebrum vividly. In order to achieve the goals of brevity, I'll provide few defining moments that pulled me towards the study of law so that there would be a few less victims in the world. These accounts have shaped me as a person and have given me a reverence and determination for the law; though it failed me as a child, it has given me an aptitude for its study as an adult. This is how my two best friends shaped my life and *my diversity* I bring to Duke Law.

Growing up in rural poverty certainly made a pivotal role on my life, but none more than realizing how hard it was to have lasting friendships. My best friend as a young child knew me better than anyone. We both came from abusive families. We both lived on rural farms. We both were told our lives would forever be the way they were. We both were raised in twisted religions we disdained, eager to escape the shackles of a life we didn't want for ourselves. Mark Scharringhausen was my cousin. While Mark and I both had several childhood illnesses that nearly took our lives, I survived mine unscathed whereas Mark lived with disabilities his entire brief life. Growing up (at the time) Christian Scientist gave us the ability to ignore reality which was the coping mechanism in which we could ignore horrific conditions and find hope for the future. When I was 11, I lost my best friend. Mark contracted a simple pneumonia but it went untreated and he died from an illness \$4 in antibiotics could have cured. It was from this loss that I somehow was able to grieve, motivate, and visualize how I would get away from a life I hated. Had Mark had legal representation, had I been older, I would have been able to do something within the courts to prevent such a senseless loss of life. These hardships have etched into me, *my diversity* through adversity.

When I was in high school I met my other best friend, Holland Dunaj. "Holly" understood me as well as Mark did and was a true friend from the day we met. Holly and I shared the same common threads in life, the abusive homes, the radical religious indoctrination and the burning desire to escape our fates. Holly even had an exit strategy in mind that was far more sophisticated than mine. In 1993 her mother snuck her out of the house and enrolled her in a pageant for Miss Illinois – All-American Teen. While this was completely inappropriate by her Fundamentalist Father's standards, it was a clandestine means her mother chose to give her a chance at something more – and Holly won. Holly had actually received a college

scholarship good anywhere and she had the grades, the talent and the model's looks to escape this god-forsaken backwater...to liberate. All she had to do was survive the last year and a half of school and she would have a possible future. –Yet my advice destroyed Holly's dream. You see, at 17 I thought I understood the law and could help her when she brought up her dilemma; she was being molested by her father. I convinced her to get an order of protection and found a shelter that would house her until the hearing. The hearing never came. Her father used his influence and convinced the judge to review the case in chambers without record. "Holly, just drop the order of protection and you can leave, we'll emancipate you". It sounded too good to be true but I didn't voice an opinion and she signed to dismissal with prejudice. Of course the ruse worked, her parents deceived her and regained custody, pulled her from school and placed her in a reform school affiliated with her father's denomination to suppress her allegations. Holly kept running from school to school, shelter to shelter until she was a legal adult and never got to use that scholarship she won. The person I thought would most likely succeed in life was crushed by the weight of an unjust society. My encouragement to use the law exacerbated her torment. Had I known the law better, had I been more diligent in reading the statements, she could have become a different person today. Today, Holly is living vicariously through me. The cards, the notes of encouragement, she has always been supportive of me, yet I realize that I can't undo what's been done to her, or my negligence as I tried to help her 16 years ago.

Unfortunately, my actions didn't just affect Holly or I, but they left a lasting legacy on a tiny high school. Rumor spread that I had "gotten out" and that I was doing okay by the time I was 20, and it encouraged others to try the same feat of survival. My friend Jesse Howell thought if Joe could leave this oppressive, closed society than so could he. Jesse was younger than I was by a few years but I was a mentor to him in many ways and I fear he looked up to me since I was defying all probabilities. We were both nerdy but I possessed an inner self-confidence that the future was bright and it resounded with him. Two years went by and I had severed all ties with my past life, I forgot about Jesse and was working on my career. I got a phone call from Holly telling me the news. "Troy, Jesse left school recently. He ran away with his girlfriend". I was almost smiling to myself as I heard this if not for her shaking voice. "Jesse Howell was murdered...his girlfriend is missing. They were hitchhiking to Florida and the police believe a serial killer preyed upon them". One more person trying to escape from our community, to "be like Joe" –Only Joe doesn't even understand how he survived his attempt.

The decisions I made had lasting consequences to me and those around me. I tried to be an example, to show others a path, but in the end only I've received an opportunity, a fair shake, a chance at a normal life. So if there is any merit to admission based on diversity, I suggest that it be on *diversity through adversity*. It is my adversity and the adversity of all those that failed around me that explains my reverence for opportunities. I live my life as the precious gift that it is when it could have ended so much differently. It is my hunger to succeed where so many countless others have been defeated that defines my character. I hope this sufficiently qualifies as to what I bring to your school's diversity.

AFTER: Diversity Statement

There are many traits I bring with me which I believe will enhance the diversity of Duke Law: perseverance, drive, motivation, a slightly older perspective than the traditional straight-out-of-college applicant. However, the most powerful would certainly have to be my diversity of experience.

My upbringing was different, and it shaped the way I view the world. My parents, originally Christian Fundamentalists, jumped from religion to religion during my childhood, seeking salvation and monetary support. As a result, we kids were dragged along from church to church, indoctrinated in a different ideology every few months, and being put into a different “church school” with each change. By the time I reached high school, I had been a part of everything from Jehovah’s Witnesses to Scientology. My parents continued to jump from belief to belief; all this change, however, had a very different effect on me. I sought to find *my* truth for myself, and not let myself be dragged along by anyone else. Around the same time that my parents were moving on to a new faith, I instead decided to immerse myself in science.

This desire to seek out my own truth also led me to leave my hometown and my parents’ home at 17, and strike out on my own. I hitchhiked my way from state to state, often going hungry, sometimes begging for food, but always with a goal in mind to make myself better. It was a struggle, sure, but it taught me to be self-reliant and accept the consequences of my own actions. I chose my path, and I needed to make the best of it. It taught me to adapt and “roll with the punches,” never letting myself become stagnant for too long.

I got myself into college and paid my way through it. I worked while I was in school, and managed to obtain fantastic technological opportunities and contracts while I was there. I fought my way into what I wanted; it was the way of the streets that I had roamed when I first left home.

To Duke Law I bring the experience of “everyman.” I have been part of the zealously religious and the steadfastly agnostic. I have been homeless, yet now live in a home that I have bought and paid for. I have begged for food, and also helped feed the hungry. My experiences have shaped me into the individual that I am, and have also tinted the manner in which I approach all my endeavors. I have seen my friends pass away seeking to do what I have done, but have somehow survived myself. I long to bring these perspectives into the classroom, hear my views challenged as well as supported, and be made to think about who I am and why I am.

The decisions I made had lasting consequences to me and those around me. I have tried to be an example, to show others a path, and have also received an opportunity, a fair shake, a chance at a normal life. So if there is any merit to admission based on diversity, I suggest that it be on diversity through adversity and diversity of experience. It is my adversity and the adversity of all those that failed around me that explains my reverence for opportunities. I live my life as the precious gift that it is when it could have ended so much differently. It is my hunger to succeed where so many countless others have been defeated that defines my character, and it is this definition that I will bring to Duke Law.

BEFORE: “Why Duke?” Written Response

“Success depends upon previous preparation, and without such preparation there is sure to be failure.”

(Confucius, China’s most famous teacher, philosopher, and political theorist, 551-479 BC)

When I saw the question “Why Duke?” a million things came to my mind: It is a prestigious law school, I will be able to get great connections and job offers with a degree from that school, the city is great, the cost of living is reasonable, etc. However the reason that propels me to obtain a degree from Duke Law is the great health care law offerings, and the environmental law offerings. I think that the combination of a Duke JD, along with the preparation those two areas can provide me, will truly assist me in my professional as well as personal endeavors. Because one cannot be successful without first being prepared, I seek a Duke Law degree in order to prepare myself in the best way possible for the upcoming successes in my professional and personal careers.

AFTER: “Why Duke?” Written Response

I often think of my life in terms of the scientific theory of punctuated equilibrium. This theory states that most organisms undergo transformation and evolution in rare, rapid events of extreme change followed by long periods of stasis, or prolonged rest. Looking back, I can pinpoint my rapid transformations clearly: Leaving my hometown at age 17 without a high school diploma, taking that first technology job without knowing anything about technology, being awarded my first contract with Abbott Laboratories, obtaining my college degree from SCU, and being promoted to one of the principal security managers at Scripts. Between each of these moments of rapid evolution, however, were long periods of stasis where I simply treaded water, slowly making my way towards the next change.

I am in a position now where I believe I am not only about to change again, but can decide how and where I want to change. I have chosen the “how” – I want to obtain a law degree. And I have also chosen the “where” – Duke Law School. Although there are many law schools that appeal to me, Duke offered a rare combination of health law and environmental law clinics that truly spoke to both of my interests: The continuation of a successful career in health care regulation, and the enhancement of my work with migratory and predatory birds. These two points, added to Duke’s exceptional academic reputation and near-idyllic location, make it an easy choice for me to make. I will not only receive an outstanding education, surrounded by driven and successful individuals, I feel that I will also be happy here. That makes Duke an easy and ideal choice for me.

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