**So You Want to go to Law School**

**Letters of Recommendations**

**Part 10**

Next week we’ll be heading back to school. The current climate has either made you forget or put off the idea of going to Law School in the Fall of 2021 or it has put you in a panic about what to do. Until we and the law schools figure out what the new normal is going to be, we have to soldier on. If you want to be a lawyer, you are going to have to learn to make wise adjustments to the changes you face. As with the law, in life you rarely can anticipate what is going to happen next. So let’s do this. Let’s get going on the application process.

I’m only going to talk about one of the requirements for your application today – the letter of recommendation [LOR]. LORs are one thing many students fear – not because they haven’t done well in school – not because there aren’t good things that can be said about them – but because they never established any kind of repour with someone that can write them a letter ***that will help***. And because of the restrictions placed on masks, social distancing, and online classes, it will be more difficult to find or cultivate a professor having knowledge of your abilities. LORs are going to be a challenge under Covid-19.

Yes, there are letters, maybe even glowing letters, that aren’t helpful. There are also bad letters. It was estimated that about 10% of the recommendations that are filed with the Law School Admissions Council [LSAC] are negative and hurt the applicant. Hoping to ignore those for a minute, there are certain things that admissions people like to see and value more than others even when the letter is positive. Of course I can’t speak for all the admissions personnel, each person is different with a different attitude about what makes a good law student. However, here are some guide lines that represent many of them.

**Who?** Who do you want to write your letters? Who don’t you want?

The best LORs are written by professors or work supervisors who know you well enough to describe your academic, personal, or professional achievements and potential. They need to be able to write about your abilities with candor, in detail, and with objectivity. I always try to find something positive that will show that I believe you can ‘do’ law school successfully. Because that’s what a law school is looking for: a person that can graduate. Maybe I’ll be able to comment that the student’s ability in research and writing is outstanding – both qualities very important in law school. Or maybe it’s obstacles the student has overcome that demonstrate courage and passion to complete what they start. Or maybe it something as simple as how they had a poor start but came on like gangbusters warming to the law and having the light come on in high beam allowing them to finish strong. Of course, the examples I just gave are just fluff and too general. After the general statement, I need to put specifics examples in the LOR to demonstrate the student’s abilities. When I can, and it’s rare, I put in that “Ms. Smith is in the top 1% of all students I have taught in my 30 years as a college professor.” AND then explain why the student is one of the best. I don’t get to do that too often, but just being in the top 5% or 10% is pretty good when one considers the thousands of students I’ve taught and the places I’ve taught. But even when I can’t say something as positive as this is one of the best 10 students I’ve had in 30 years of teaching I find and comment on the positives in the student I’ve noticed that convinced me to write the letter.

Of course, it’s much easier to know a student and find positive things to say when the student has taken me for more than one class and gotten an “A” in all the classes and where we’ve had discussions in my office or between classes. But even a “B” student can have positives. I admit that the recommendation for a “B” student generally is not as glowing as for the “A”, 1% student, but it can still be positive. [Some of the best I think I’ve written had very little to do with school but the personal life of the student. I’ll talk about that in a minute.] I don’t think I’ve ever written a LOR for a student with less than a “B”. If I did, there were probably special circumstances that made me believe this student could graduate from law school. I can promise I don’t write a recommendation with nothing but platitudes without specifics to back it up.

**So who should you ask?**

1. Someone who knows you well

2. The higher up the Department food chain the writer is the better. Of course this is assuming that they know you and can explain why you should be admitted to law school and with specifics. It’s also helpful if the someone you ask is a professor at the school granting your baccalaureate degree or at least a University you’ve attended. And while I am a fan of community colleges, a professor at one where you only took core courses probably isn’t helpful. Law schools want to know if you can do advanced, difficult work.

3. Someone with an advanced degree who has supervised you in a meaningful job or internship and can give specific examples of your abilities that amount to more than making copies and coffee. Law school and grad school courses are harder than undergraduate studies. Someone writing a LOR with just a baccalaureate degree may not truly understand what it takes to make it in the post-baccalaureate, upper levels of education.

4. Someone who has academically evaluated you in an upper-division class

5. Note that there isn’t one word about only using political science professors. LORs can be from any professor in any department that knows and can write about you in the correct way.

So, have you identified several people yet?

**Start Now:** Start identifying four or five people to write recommendations for you in the fall if you plan to apply for Fall 2021. Yes, I know most law schools only want two or three, but someone may turn you down or agree to do it, but never get around to actually writing the LOR.

The people you select should be able to talk about specific skills you possess that will transfer to law schoolwork – research, writing, determination to overcome obstacles, etc. If they can give examples of your abilities, even better. Often people select professors/teachers or bosses that don’t understand exactly what you want. You want specific examples not “Mary was a good student and got an ‘A’ in my class” and not ‘Johnny makes a good cup of coffee and makes copies with the best of them at work.” Yes, the professor can say Mary got an “A” in the LOR, but there must be more. How did she excel? What about her work was memorable? Remember the admissions people have your transcripts. They know what grade Mary got in the professor’s class.

**Don’t ask these people** [usually]

1. Anyone that will just write a general, unreservedly praiseworthy letters without specifics.

2. Family members, friends, friends of your parents, religious leaders, political figures, judges, and the like usually are discouraged and may, in fact, be detrimental. Again there are exceptions if they meet 3 above in “So who should you ask?” Just because someone is a judge [or any of the others] doesn’t mean that they KNOW you and your abilities.

3. No relatives that just talk about how cute you were when you were little and that you were always such a nice child and often set the table without crying. I’d suggest no relatives, period. If you were evaluating a LOR, would you believe what a relative wrote about their son or nephew or niece?

4. Probably not your religious leader, unless you did special things that can show overcoming obstacles and dedication to completion of a task – a hard task. Again, would you expect a religious leader to be hard on a parishioner? They probably should be avoided for a recommendation because you probably haven’t done the kind of things that readily transfer to success in law school.

**5**. **Your Academic Advisor: NO**. One of the things I often hear about is that students ask their academic advisor for a letter of recommendation. Why would you do that? Are they able to write about any of the positive things we are looking for? Not likely. Yes, on the whole advisors are nice people and may be one of the few people on campus that you feel you can talk to, that is friendly, that know you on a personal level, and will write you a letter if pressured. Well, don’t ask them. Their letters, as well-meaning and positive as they may be, will not help and will probably hurt your chances. They have no personal knowledge of your abilities that law schools want to hear about. Everything they know about your abilities in the classroom is hearsay or available in your transcript. Again, don’t ask them.

**IMPORTANT NOTE 1:** Don’t pressure someone to write an LOR for you. If the professor indicates that he doesn’t want to or starts hem-hawing around and it’s clear he is hesitant, say, “Thanks anyway.” Smile and leave. If the professor feels pressured to do something, he will likely do a poor job writing a letter or ‘forget’ to do it at all. Or it could be he just doesn’t think you’re grad school or law school material and doesn’t know a nice way to say it.

**What Makes a Great Recommendation Letter**

Most schools prefer comments about academic potential, hence letters from faculty members are highly valued. The best letter writers are those who know you well and can provide an evaluation of your ability to perform and succeed at law school. This is why it is beneficial for you to establish meaningful relationships with your professors. Take every opportunity to get to know and talk with your professors: go to office hours, answer or ask questions in class, seek advice about your career, do independent research or study with a professor whose recommendation you may want. If they don’t know you, how do you expect a professor to write an in-depth LOR for you? “Bob took my class and got an “A”. His attendance was good.” Yawn. Generally speaking, the most eloquent recommendation letters are written by people who have observed an applicant's work and witnessed the applicant's growth. That is why you should consider professors or supervisors that have worked with you over a period of time and not just one class. Law schools hope to gain insight into a candidate’s promise in the study of law, so they value honesty and candor from the writer. Letters that reflect real knowledge of an applicant’s performance and character are the most useful to the admissions committee and, therefore, to the candidate. One or two paragraph letters full of generalities, however complementary, are not particularly helpful.

Not all of us had great grades as an undergrad. And there may have been a reason, a good reason. Not everyone has an easy life full of roses, money, and 12-year-old, single malt scotch. Many students have had obstacles to overcome – and they did. If a professor is aware of what you’ve had to overcome to excel in her classroom, it can make a very compelling LOR. I know I’ve had a hand full of students that so impressed me by their ability to overcome severe difficulties in life that, well, what they overcame just to be at UH would have either put me in a mental hospital, a prison for going berserk, or in an early grave. I know I was very impressed by what they overcome and accomplished. I thought the letters I wrote for them were some of my best. A former dean of admissions at a top 10 law school said that the most memorable recommendation letters he saw describe an applicant's persistence and grit. Letters where the professors were able to talk about the applicant's academic failure and how he or she crawled out of whatever hole had been dug and ultimately ended up excelling.

Law school is full of surprises that one has to overcome. But so is life. Put the two together and it’s not surprising for a student to be walking peacefully through law school when a proverbial piano falls out of nowhere on the student threatening the dream of becoming a lawyer. The law school likes to see that the student can survive an unseen incident and come back even stronger. A letter that can show the applicant's progression as a person and demonstrate the applicant's ability to cope with serious challenges can be a strong letter.

**IMPORTANT NOTE 2: Covid-19 problems**

Do your professors know you? If students haven’t already established repour with several professors, I’m concerned that professors will not have the opportunity to get to know their students very well – especially if the course is taught online. Yes, the professor will grade your tests and papers. But they may have a difficult time putting a name and face to a grade. And you won’t be about to talk to the professor after class about issues or questions about this or that. Class is over – everyone signs off and the professor opens another Shiner. You are going to have a more difficult time finding someone that can write that really positive LOR.

Even if you take a class face-to-face, there will be little interfacing with your professor. Office hours will be curtailed or on something like Zoom, if they exist at all. Time before and after class will be social distanced. Walking with the professor to the next class will likely not happen. What kind of a conversation can you have when walking six feet apart?

The heavy burden is going to fall on you to identify those professors that you have established some type of professional or educational relationship or to establish one in this current environment. I wish I had an answer for you – but I don’t.

**IMPORTANT NOTE 3**: You need to see the recommendation before it goes into LSAC so that you can catch the unhelpful ones, as described above, or the bad one. YES, people sometimes send in bad recommendations. Remember, LSAC said about 10% of the recommendations that they receive for students can only be called negative recommendations. You need to weed these out. If I write a recommendation for you, I will always offer to you the opportunity to read it. Do that. Always ask to see the letter. And if it’s mine, please check it for grammar and punctuation and tell me of the errors so I can correct them.