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On the Ground: Real World Solutions: Writing Winning Personal Statements for Scholarship Applications

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ON THE GROUND: REAL-WORLD SOLUTIONS

WRITING WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENTS

FOR SCHOLARSHIP APPLICATIONS

Tips and best practices for writing authentic and persuasive personal statements.

BY SAVANNA NOLAN

Each year, the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) awards thousands of dollars in scholarships to individuals pursuing law, library science, and other related degrees or programs. As with many scholarships and awards, a personal statement is one of the requirements for an AALL scholarship application. Thanks to being a member, vice-chair, and chair of the AALL Scholarship Awards Jury from 2017-2020, I have read an ocean of personal statements. As part of hiring committees, I've also read a lot of cover letters, which I view as being similar to personal statements. Judges and reviewers already have your resume, now you need to highlight what else you bring to the table.

The Basics

As with cover letters, personal statements are an

opportunity for you to make a case as to why you are so good that an organization can't help but want to work with you. In the case of AALL scholarships, the Scholarship Awards Jury is generally looking to invest in the future of law librarians who will contribute positively to the profession and to the Association. This is displayed in the application, which asks applicants to address "your interest in law librarianship" and "your career goals as a law librarian."

First, I beg you, please dive deeper into your motivations than professing your lifelong love of books or your memories of loving the public library as a child. The application prompt here specifies *law* librarianship, and what we do on a day-to-day basis is very different from what a bookseller or public librarian does. That being said, for every rule there is an exception. I remember one particularly good essay where the applicant translated their childhood librarian's acceptance of their marginalized status into their mission statement; the applicant felt called to make libraries a safe space because that was what had been done for them. But that is also digging deeper than "ever since I was a child, I have always had a love of books," a specific sentence I have read far too many times.



FIGURE 1

- A personal statement in which you include:
 - Financial information you feel the jury could use in determining your financial need (e.g. cost of living, familial financial obligations, childcare expenses, student loans, etc.);
 - Your interest in law librarianship and reasons for applying for this scholarship;
 - Your career goals as a law librarian.

You may also include other pertinent information such as work and family commitments that you would like the Scholarship Jury to consider when evaluating your application. Personal statements should be complete and well-written. Your personal statement should establish your financial need by thoroughly and clearly addressing your financial situation and need for a scholarship. You should also detail any leadership roles you have had in AALL or other library associations.

FIGURE 2

1. Financial need/reasons for applying
 - a. Work/family
 - i. Student Loans – law school/undergrad, want to minimize MLIS
 - ii. Washington, DC is expensive (even with two roommates)
 - iii. Working two part-time jobs
2. Career goals/interest in law librarianship
 - a. Working for University of Georgia Law Library while studying for bar exam
 - b. Passion for helping students learn at their own pace (e.g., me discovering treatises)
 - c. Career goal – making changes to help nontraditional law students have a better experience [related to b. above (meeting the students where they are)]
3. Leadership experience with AALL already
 - a. Already a member of AALL (and the Academic Law Librarians Special Interest Section), Law Librarians of Washington, DC, and American Library Association
 - b. Vice President of Catholic University's graduate student chapter of the American Library Association and what I've worked on with them

So how do you craft an authentic, winning personal statement?

Step 1: Read the Prompt

Read the prompt with a highlighter or pen and mark each substantive concept it asks for. Look closely at every single concept. For example, in last year's AALL Scholarship application it stated you "may" include work and family commitments. It's not in the list of three major bullet points, but it's definitely a thing I'd want to discuss if it helps me make my case. In my example, I've marked it in a different color (purple) to remind myself that it's optional (see Fig. 1).

Step 2: Outline the Major Points


Looking at all of your major points, see if you can combine any of them into broader concepts. I usually shoot for three major points, but don't feel like you have to hit that number if the concepts don't mesh together nicely or if the prompt is particularly long. As I group the points, I also try to think of one or two specific and concrete examples from my life that address the concept nicely. As an example, for AALL

Scholarships, after an introductory paragraph I would definitely want to include at least one paragraph addressing my financial need. Maybe that paragraph would also address my work and family commitments, but if I thought I had enough of a story to tell, that point might warrant its own paragraph. If you think someone reading your resume might have an obvious question, such as "Why do they want a library degree after 10 years as a space lawyer?" (a completely made-up example), I would suggest picking a personal story that helps address that question. Thinking back on my life during my first year of library school, I've jotted down an outline (see Fig. 2) of how I would have written a personal statement if I knew then what I know now.

Step 3: Use Tone to Your Advantage

As students in legal writing learn, there are always two levels to what you write: what you actually *say*, and how you *spin*

FIGURE 3

 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Financial need/reasons for applying <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Work/family <ol style="list-style-type: none"> i. Student Loans – law school/undergrad, want to minimize MLIS ii. Washington, DC is expensive (even with two roommates) iii. Working two part-time jobs 	<p>Savanna Lynn Nolan I'm working hard to make this work</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Career goals/interest in law librarianship <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Working for University of Georgia Law Library while studying for bar exam b. Passion for helping students learn at their own pace (e.g., me discovering treatises) c. Career goal – making changes to help nontraditional law students have a better experience [related to b. above (meeting the students where they are)] 	<p>Savanna Lynn Nolan I know what I'm getting into professionally and will be SUCH a great teaching librarian.</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Leadership experience with AALL already <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Already a member of AALL (and the Academic Law Librarians Special Interest Section), Law Librarians of Washington, DC, and American Library Association b. Vice President of Catholic University's graduate student chapter of the American Library Association and what I've worked on with them 	<p>Savanna Lynn Nolan Again, see? Look at how hard I'm working and contributing to the profession.</p>

the things that you say. You will say a lot of things about your finances, your goals, and your skills, but ultimately you want your reader to finish reviewing your application and think, “Of course we have to help fund this student.”

Importantly, if you don't watch your tone, it can backfire on you. Think of the difference between “I never really knew what I wanted to do before I found librarianship” and “Once I found librarianship, everything finally clicked.” I like to jot down notes about what kind of tone I want to strike in each paragraph, as I've done in Figure 3. My secret tonal sentences will never make it to the final version, but I want to mull them over as I write my topic sentence for each paragraph and choose specific words to highlight my examples. Ideally, every sentence in that paragraph will reinforce my secret tonal sentence.

Tone can apply to and be reflected in the overall structure of your personal statement as well. While I think it could work either way, I personally would want to switch the order of my paragraphs from my initial draft outline so that I'm making an “argument sandwich.” (See Fig. 3.) Moving my financial need paragraph to the second paragraph changes the order of key points in my statement so the first and third paragraphs focus on my work ethic and accomplishments, while the middle paragraph is my “ask” to the reader. For a different approach, with cover letters I usually order paragraphs based on what aspects of the job are given the most prominence in the job description.

Step 4: Write

A blank page is scary, but you already have an outline. Now it's just about filling in the gaps. First, write a short introductory paragraph including basic information such as your name, where you're applying to school, and maybe how long you've been a member of AALL. Then you can fill out your

outline, expanding on your specific examples, proving your point, and reinforcing your secret tonal sentence. Then the last paragraph can tie everything together: thank the jury for their time, and state that you look forward to hearing from them soon.

As far as writing about sensitive topics such as your finances, I have seen some applicants discuss it broadly, while others have given their precise monthly budgets. I don't think there is one “right” way to do it, but you *do* want to show the jury that you have carefully thought through the financial implications of going back to school.

Step 5: Edit & Review

While you should always look for typos and grammar, this step goes beyond that. Look back over your initial mark-up of the prompt. Did you address every point, even if some of those points were combined into one paragraph? Whether it's a scholarship personal statement or a cover letter, your reader likely has a scoring rubric of some kind. Speaking from experience, they want to give you points, so be sure to check all the boxes! ■

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