

# Confessions of an Admissions Committee Junkie

Francis M. Nevins, Jr.

Yes, Doctor, it's quite comfortable, can't feel a lump anywhere. Didn't most of you folks stop using couches around the time Freud died? . . . I don't know why I'm lying down on this thing anyway. It wasn't even my idea to come see you . . . It was the dean's . . . .

What mental problems? I still enjoy teaching law, I'm paid well, I get tons of students in my classes, my cats love me . . . Well, you see, Doctor, the dean is worried about my attitude toward the law school admissions committee. I've been on it most of the past ten years, and every year he reappoints me and I never scream or raise a stink. He thinks I've gone fruity.

Do I *like* having to read a hundred and 50 files a week during high season? Well, "like" is too strong a word, but the job does have its perverse compensations . . . Uh, strike that "perverse," okay?

I suppose it goes back to when I was a kid. Everything does, right? Anyway, when I was in my early teens, my brother and I used to write short stories, just for fun, and share them. Well, that was 30-odd years ago, and I can't remember a word of what I wrote back then, but there's a line from one of my brother's that I can't shake to save my life. It was in a Western. They were going to hang the hero; the line goes:

"Guards! Escort the prisoner to the trap!" bellowed the sheriff unmercilessly.

I've been in love with nutty one-liners ever since. I seek them out in everything I read. I write them down. Memorize a lot of them. Recite them at parties. Sometimes at faculty meetings. When I can't sleep at night I start saying them to myself like a mantra and

in three minutes I'm dreaming. All perfectly normal. Lots of your patients do it, right?

Before I became a law professor I lived back East, and there was a guy living nearby who was a professional writer. He wasn't 50 yet and he'd published something like two hundred novels, all paperback originals. Private eye books, spy thrillers, Gothics under female bylines, historical romances, movie and TV tie-in books — you'd name it and give him a few thousand bucks' advance and he'd write it.<sup>1</sup> Well, we were neighbors, so I began reading some of his stuff. And can you guess what I found? Bingo! Hundreds and hundreds of the same sort of off-the-wall lines scattered throughout every single book the guy ever wrote! And the amazing part of it is, no one ever edited them out! He would write these goofy paperbacks in a couple of days or a week apiece and they'd be packed to the rafters with these insane lines and the publishers would publish them that way. And no one would notice! Except me. I saved them. I collected them. Still do.<sup>2</sup>

Samples? Well, yes, I do happen to have some with me. How many can you stand? . . . Okay, we'll stop at three.

Time, which brings ruin to once proud buildings, gnarled limbs to even the sturdiest tree, had brought a very young and beautiful young woman her eighteenth birthday.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the exact and literal truth, although for obvious reasons I don't want to mention the writer's name here. For those who are determined to uncover his identity, see Francis M. Nevins, Jr., *Murder at Noon*, THE NEW REPUBLIC, July 22, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> In one respect this is not the exact and literal truth. I am not the only one who saves and savors the screwballisms perpetrated by the writer under discussion. For representative catalogues of his one-liners, see BILL PRONZINI, *GUN IN CHEEK* (1982), and *SON OF GUN IN CHEEK*, ch. 11 (1987).

He had died as he had lived. With his boots on. But the sharp cornice of rock in the earth which had pierced his left lung when he fell had no intelligence or mercy or compassion.

He replied very patiently, pointing a finger at the bodice of her dress where her ample young breasts seemed to bubble like boiling fritters in the pot that holds them.

For Georgia Wellington, alone in the entire spectrum and cosmos of her private world of Seven Elms and sorrow for the lost dead and wishful hoping for the future, the universe had suddenly halted on its imaginary axis, toppling, spilling, sending careening into the darkest corners of her mind all sorts of objects and images and possibilities.

Oh, I'm sorry, was that a fourth? Yes, I do tend to get carried away when I start reading this guy. But would you believe that every one of those cubic zirconia of literature comes from the first 50 pages of just one of his books?<sup>3</sup> And he's written at least two hundred books!

What does all this have to do with demanding to stay on the law school admissions committee? Well, for years I'd figured that this former neighbor of mine was, you know, a total oddball. *Sui generis*. Do you do crossword puzzles? There's a word that pops up in half the crossword puzzles in print but has never been used by a real live person anywhere. The word is "oner." It supposedly means "something or someone unique." That's what I thought this guy was, a oner. Even if it took me till I was on Social Security to find and read all his two hundred titles and harvest all the malapropisms, I always figured that when I'd finished the last one, well, that would be the ball game, there'd

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<sup>3</sup> This is the exact and literal truth once again. See JEAN-ANNE DE PRE, *A SOUND OF DYING ROSES* (1971). The rest of the book is as chock-full of cubic zirconia as the first 50 pages.

never be any more, no one else in the world could ever dream them up like him.

And then I got on the admissions committee and discovered that dozens and dozens of college seniors and college graduates who were trying to get into law school were writing just like that guy! That's right, in their personal statements. In essays that they send in to us as part of their applications and that they *know* they're going to be judged by!

And, doctor, I'm hooked on them. I comb through those personal statements like a hawk. I sieve out the cubic zirconia. I keep lists of them. God help me, I even classify them . . . .

Oh, no, it's not hard at all to classify them. Most of them fall into one or another of a half-dozen categories. Some fit very well within more than one, and then I have to make a more or less arbitrary choice where to log them in . . . How ever did you guess? Yes, I do happen to have some samples with me. Where would you like me to begin?

Well, one thing I quickly learned from reading admissions files was that hundreds of aspiring law students seem to have an irresistible tendency to tell us that they are the eighth wonder of the world, the living reincarnation of Brandeis or Darrow. And when they trip over their untied linguistic shoelaces while patting themselves on the shoulder — well, that is what generates the material I've collected under the title

### How Great I Are: A Slew of Scatterbrained Self-Congratulations

It is my pleasure to take this time to write to you about myself.

I am pleased to divulge certain qualities I hope shall be viewed as favorable.

I have always hoped to feel accomplished with what I am doing.

I am a person of principle that despite my cynicism is basically idealistic.

I am a very independent person that is a leader and not a follower . . . . When considering me for admission, I feel I have excellent law school potential.

My uniqueness has always set me apart from others.

I feel that I am also in possession of the necessary desire and discipline which is necessary to perservere the rigors of law school.

A conqueror of circumstances dire enough to defeat most have become captions of my personality.

I do not stand a bug under his rock.

I am not the type of person that allows her life and its events to slip through the holes.

I am brassy because of my "biting wit" of which so many of my colleagues have felt the wrath (and lived to tell about it).

I am a fine young lady and given the chance to enhance my bright future I will be more than proud to represent your fine institution.

Alas, I am filled with hope for a peaceful and productive world.

Injustice and inequality have always been a sore spot in my personal character.

I have a strong interest for the poor and indignant of our society.

I will spear you a page-long essay of how I am "esprit de corps" to my schoolwork.

I was able to overcome numerous obstacles that would otherwise cause others to give up trying.

I have yet to fail at any academic encounter I have endeavored.

I submit to you that I am one of the best and I know that being exposed to the best faculty, the best students and the best research facilities, such as you provide, will only fuel me to higher heights.

Obtaining a Bachelor of Arts degree has ameliorated my oral and written skills.

Doctor, I resent that suggestion very much. I haven't made up a single one of those lines. I'm not a good enough writer to invent them deliberately and I hope and pray I'm not bad enough to write them by inadvertence . . . You want to hear more? I *thought* you might get addicted.

Another thing I learned after a year or so on the admissions committee was that law school applicants have a compulsion to tell us their life stories. Now that can be a rational strategy. If you know that your LSAT score and GPA put you in the vast undifferentiated middle with hundreds of others, it makes sense to try to impress the committee with what makes you stand out. Done competently and persuasively, the strategy can be a winner. Done ineptly, the story of your life makes you stand out in all the wrong ways. Which brings us to some horrible examples, which I've compiled under the heading

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### **What Things I've Did: A Barrage of Biographical Boo-Boos**

In order for my application to be fairly evaluate, important information of my past needs to be told.

A retrospective self-analysis of my undergraduate career offers some interesting insights into the development of my character and the direction that my future has taken.

I came from a very successful family essentially constituted of the same nature as I.

Both me and my spouse are financially independent.

My parents have struggled for years to put my sister and I through good schools.

My father could neither support my brother, sister or I in college.

I was ambigious about going to college.

I have had the fortunate pleasure of attending a college preparatory school where I experienced a firsthand educational experience in a school founded by the Society of Jesus. The experience, atmosphere and values I learned and came to appreciate have endeared myself and my family to all Jesuit schools throughout the country.

Although the high school I attended failed to equip me for college writing courses, I knew that it was up to me to undue the damage.

I have been fortunate enough to attend three fine schools which have educated me in the highest of fashions.

I left my abroad tour in November 1983, thereby causing me to dis-enroll myself from college during the preceding month.

The English department, of which I am enrolled, is a very challenging course of study.

I jumped into the idea of becoming a Pharmacist half-hazardly.

In selecting Sociology as my undergraduate discipline I subsequently received, to which I could perceive to be, the best possible training for the study of law. As the arms of the law stretches into all aspects of our socioeconomic existance, Sociology exemplified the diversity I saw essential in pursuing a career in the legal profession . . . . Thus the perspective of my interests coupled with the maintainment of utilizing in the legal profession weigh heavily in my decision to pursue the study of law.

The courses that I did not have the opportunity to experience may have provided me with a strong academic foundation.

I was determined to exercise my mental abilities at a accredited university . . . . I successfully completed my first year of classes with a above average GPA.

Being successful as possible academic wise seemed to have taken a back burner.

I must beleive that the year round football practice schedule accompanied by the fatigue that it produced hendered my desire to study consistently by reducing my amount of study time.

The research I compiled was formulated into a pocket hand-book of which was in demand by Police Officers to refer citizens who they encountered on their shifts who needed some form of community assistance.



The problem I had with alcohol was attributed to nothing more than letting my priorities slip away, losing track of my goals, and becoming completely nocturnal in my daily lifestyle.

Other interests include art, piano, guitar, symphonies, and amateur acting.

I have observed the rights of children and families intertwined and played out in a heartstring reality.

I have networked with health professionals to problemsolve appropriately and creatively.

Although my career was progressing, the career progression accelerated my enlightenment for a need of attainment of my ultimate goal — to practice law.

I have already invested a numerous amount of money and time into achieving my past goals.

As a financially independent student, I have had to work continuously since early high school.

My total undergraduate expense was paid by my Mother who contributed 15-20% and myself of which I contributed the remaining 80-85%.

I have to support my mother, which became mentally disabled.

The accident left two of us dead and one in a coma.

It became apparent to me that knowledge acquired of the law and its application to health care is virtually important to ensure that adequate health care is rendered.

I suppose that was when I first became interested and involved with people and deepened my love of the law.

My undergraduate studies provided a foundation from which to build on, and law school will provide the infrastructure of my career.

. . . No, Doctor, I can't argue with that point. When you write about yourself you can honestly claim you know the subject better than anyone else. Most of the time, anyway. But it's *how* you write about yourself that can make or break you with an admissions committee. If I were advising a student who was applying for law school, I'd say: Sure, tell us the story of your life. But briefly, briefly. And please, for heaven's sake, have someone proofread it before you put it in the mail!

. . . Is there anything I'd encourage this advisee of mine to leave out of a personal statement? You betcha. Young man or woman, I'd say, you are not Keye Luke on *Kung Fu*. You aren't old enough, bald enough, or wise enough to be dispensing pearls of thought to the little grasshopper. Please don't try. Because if you put your foot in your mouth while you're turning hand-springs to demonstrate what a profound soul you are, you're bound to land hard on your rear end. But every year a few bold venturers feel the urge to treat admissions committees to their insights into literature or history or whatever — sometimes even into legal education! — and thanks to them I have in my pocket a sheaf of goodies I call

### **How Deep I've Thunk: A Plethora of Philosophic Pratfalls**

The great Bard's lasting notoriety is owed equally to his ability to analyze and distill the gamut of human emotion and motivation as to his linguistic finesse.

The desire to attend [your] School of Law is an affirmative stance against the philosophy of Schopenhauer.

Humans in the 20th century have pushed relativism to absurd proportions, creating a residuum for the 21st century, a crawlspce that deafens and blinds.

It is important to remember that full knowlrdge encompasses all areas of learning.

Even in accepting the higher level of predictability, there is still a chance for err.

My reasoning lies in that intaitive base.

In our progressive society we are able to take people off of life row by heart transplants so they can live more meaningful and productive lives.

Cities, towns, villages, and communitites have a dark, dim and obscure feature. Filth, contamination, greed, extortion, and the unpredicable can be found here.

The poor are threatened with absolution of legal aid.

As we take even a closer look we find that criminals walk the streets, sexual molesters inhabit the ally ways, and prostitutes solcite for business right in front of our very own eyes. Additionally, we find that pedophiles, and granny bashers hide behind respected images . . . . Alcoholics, drug dependents, and the mentally corrupt and disturbed are harbored into common grounds and kept out of social circulation . . . . Smugglers, check forgers, embezzlers, rapists, mass murderers, wife beaters, and others camafloge themselves behind respected role models . . . . If something is not done, we may find ourselves on a downhill journey without any brakes.

Reasons given for such wide-spread attention given to this matter is the omnipresence of television in our society.

An opportunity for a legal education is to destroy a barrier of ignorance towards a framework from which all other legitimate functions of society must acknowledge to guarantee their existence.

I have no disillusion about defending the innocent against a tyrannical criminal justice system.

An unorganized working atmosphere dampers productivity.

Success is not gagued by money alone.

Too many times we end up saying something that can be interpreted in manners opposite of our intent.

American society is entering a highly egoistic and legalistic phase.

The study and practice of law is an implicit intellectual exercise.

The future of the legal environment may be reshaped by all who dive into it's realm.

A lawyer receives the knowledge which enables him or her to be the masters of Litigation.

Due to an increase in the complexity of instutional services and mangement in the modern health delivery system there is an increase demand on legal knowledge.

Each student enters law school with the general skills that is the foundation of a legal education. During their stay at law school, this foundation is expanded upon and the final product is a lawyer to be.

It is told that Law School is a place of frustration and mental derange. When that is compounded with other problems, the scope of performance for any student will not be at par.

Let not the seeds of destruction be planted which could have a serious snowballing effect creating these nightmares in this controversial hot bath.

. . . Did I hear you say bottom of the barrel? You think all these chunks of verbal anthracite have to be coming from people who don't have a chance in the world of being admitted into a respectable law school? Well, I don't know. I don't keep track of the LSAT scores and GPAs of the people who give me my raw material, and I don't have the slightest idea how many of them were accepted by our own school or any other. But you're certainly right if you mean that substantial numbers of the applicants who put their word processors in their mouths do have academic problems that make it tough for them to be admitted.

How do I know? Because the next category I happen to have in my pocket is made up of nothing but ridiculous excuses for low grades or scores or whatever. I call this pile of linguistic shavings

### **My F's Ain't Fair: An Amalgam of Academic Alibis**

In reviewing my academic transcripts, I think there are a few insights in which the committee should be made aware.

I realize a poor grade point average is an unexcuseable flair on a law school application, however, I possess a rebuttal for my qualifications.

Test results have proven to be an inferior and incredulous representation of my potential.

If I would of had 4 more credit hours I would have graduated cum laude.

Without working my grades would of been higher.

As you will note, there is a discrepancy between my LSAT score and my overhaul GPA. I realize that undergraduate records are objective academic criteria which, though important, are determinative. That criteria other than the GPA will be considered. Such as Maturity, upward trends in grades, growth potential, number of years out of school, work experience and community involvement will be evaluated.

I fear certain circumstances that have resulted in detriment upon my academic record may defract your perception of my present and future capabilities for study, therefore I must make reference to such as a base for my contentions of being a responsible, determined and hard working individual.

I will prove it to you beyond a reasonable shadow of a doubt.

Due to erratic and uncertain study choices, coupled with the emotional strain I underwent which refrained me from making a quick adjustment to the situation, my academic record suffered extensive detriment.

Contributing to the low GPA at such time was a University procedural manifestation which changed two withdrawal notations to automatic failure grades because of my failing to repeat the courses within the necessary two semesters time. Unaware of such a procedure, I had withdrawn at the interim of that semester for which I was uninterestingly taking business courses in order to attain a full time job within the legal field and concurrently undertake paralegal course study which had suddenly claimed my interest.

I am sure you can see that I am doing my very utmost to resurrect my academic credentials, thereby making them acceptable to you.

I have no more ceremonious an explanation for my GPA than to say it was earned through a lack of effort.

Upon receipt of the LSAT test scores I was unsatisfied with the results.

The results of this test as I recall were in the low 400's of which is a below average score.

My intention to continue working while attending law school is not irrefutable.

I have not sought employment elsewhere.

I was naturally discouraged to here that I have been put on the waiting list.

I am requesting that my admissions file remain ajar.

. . . Sad? You couldn't know how sad unless you were an educator. These are college seniors and sometimes college graduates, writing this stuff under no deadline pressure, knowing they'll be judged by what they write. And when teaching's your life's work and you find hundreds of these verbal cow pies, well, you have to laugh and beneath the laughter you have to cry . . . Oh well, only two categories to go.

Sometimes I think everyone who applies to law school has been taking nips from the same pamphlet on how to write a winning law school application. Hardly a file crosses my desk that doesn't include paragraphs of gush about how marvelous it is to be a lawyer and what a peachy lawyer the applicant will make. After a year or two on an admissions committee you learn, when you hit this obligatory patch in the personal statement, to fast-forward till it's behind you. Unless you're like me and you comb through the briars for gems of ineptitude. Which are there in abundance. I've filed mine under the heading

### **How Good I'll Serve: An Anthology of Asinine Aspirations**

This is what we strive for isn't?; to always better ourselves.

I have always strove to make my goals fully realized.

Law is the field I have chosen, not for its prestige or future opportunities, but for the fascination I hold for it.

The legal field is a highly admirable and respected profession that I would be sincerely honored to be a part.

A lawyer must carry out honest duties helping their society.

I feel that my wantonness to study law and my abilities will enable me to be a successful law student and attorney.

Why I am motivated to becoming a lawyer can be shown to stem from a deep-seeded desire to help those who cannot help themselves.

My intent is to combat social despairation . . . to help the poverty-strickened.

The facets of criminal justice intrigues me. The concept of equality versus efficiency probes my fascination.

When violence becomes ugly and utterly unexcuseable I want to be able to throw the book at it.

I crave for the opportunity to get involved in politics, education, social activities, and any other extracurricular event in which I may be of service to mankind.

My desire to study law stems in part from my aspiration to become a constituent in the continuing evolution of our society.



My goal is to become a legal force in the development of better international relations among people of all doctrines.

Studying law will allow me to look through the greatest windows of life regarding the human condition.

If admitted I would receive a microscopic view, in the art of advocacy, legal research, and the sources and social purposes of legal principles.

The knowledge that I extracted from my closest professors has given me the desire to pursue righteousness and equality for all mankind . . . . I feel compelled to study law, become a lawyer and support litigation that is righteous in the eyes of God.

It is my intention to fulfill my desire for a successful future by ingratiating my education, experiences and interests through the pursuit of a career as an attorney.

Being a lawyer will fulfill my need to be involved in a profession where enough stimulation exists to illicit self-motivation and warrent dedication.

My final objective is to practically apply the knowledge received during four years of legal academia with a private law firm and to consult companies faced with environmental legalities.

Whenever I am asked a question pertaining to my goals in the legal profession, I find that my answers variate from person to person.

I need to fulfill a desire which started years ago as a seed of a thought, but has pulled me to a point of action.

I am greatly interested in a completely unique geographic atmosphere than that of the East.

Studying law in [your city] would be a tremendous step forward, achieving my ultimate internal plateau.

First, unlike some law schools, I could obtain a sound corporate legal education.

My push for excellence will be evident by the demeanor of my latest college grades.

I know that I am able to do very good in school if given the time to study.

I feel I have the appetite, dedication and confidence to tackle a demanding law school curriculum.

Attaining a Juris Doctrine degree would be the capstone of my academic career.

I plan to play an intricate role in a city in which I am strongly concerned with.

To be able to defend the proper curriculum of an American citizen's life will be transitive to the act of molding my own footprints into the American legal network.

. . . Doctor, I'm surprised at you! I wouldn't give you the names and addresses of those students even if I had them. Isn't it unethical for a shrink to solicit business?

Now you might think that nothing could be worse than these nuggets of knuckleheadedness I've been sharing with you, but you'd be wrong. Awful as they are, all of them were written by students, which means that the perpetrators can point their fingers at the abysmal state of education in this country as some sort of extenuating circumstance. But when the exact same drivel shows up in letters of recommendation for students — letters written by attorneys and businesspeople and even by professors — where's the excuse for *these* witlings? I admit I haven't found a huge number

of groaners from this source, but — remember what Spencer Tracy in one of his movies said about Katharine Hepburn? — what there is, is *cherce*. This final bouquet of skunk cabbages I call

**I Wholeheartfully Urge You to Recept This Kid  
and Other Recommendations from Hell**

As my former student, I had the opportunity of evaluating his academic performance.

I have known him for more than ten years, and consider him to be of upmost character and moral turpitude.

He is naturally inquizative.

Both his oral and verbal communications skills are excellent.

Mary is blessed with unboundless energy.

Methodical and orderliness are two characteristics which she exemplifies.

Both of her moral and social characters are of the highest caliber.

. . . Well! I feel a little better already. It seems Ann Landers and Dear Abby are right — it *does* help to share suppressed feelings with somebody.

I'd feel a lot better if I did *what?* Doctor, forgive me for saying this, but maybe it's time you got down on this couch yourself for a while. Turn that off-the-wall material into a law journal article? What journal in its right mind would want to publish a linguistic compost heap like that?

Thanks again, Doctor. I have to run now, I'm late for a meeting. You guessed it. Admissions committee.

