

An International Student's Guide to Applying to U.S. Law Schools

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If you're an international student, applying to law school in the United States can sometimes feel a little like navigating a complicated maze. In addition to all of the things U.S. citizens have to think about (LSAT scores, the application, the personal statement, résumés, and more), there are many other things you must also consider: The compatibility of your degree, how your grades convert, where you'll take the LSAT (since it is not offered in all cities or even all countries), and how you'll finance law school, among many others.

This Guide will give you the general background you need to start the law school application process, and will also cover some essential topics that apply specifically to international students.

How is the law school application process different for international applicants?

We'll cover the basics of the application process in just a bit—but first, let's begin by talking about points that are of specific concern to international students:

1. Your international status: Do U.S. law schools accept international students?
2. Your immigration status: How will you study in the U.S.?
3. The LSAT: Your study options, and where you can take it.
4. The TOEFL: Some schools require you take it.
5. Your undergraduate (college) performance: How your degree and grades stack up.

6.Submitting your application: How LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service works for you.

7.Paying for law school: Providing proof of funding, and getting help to pay for it.

8.Using your degree outside of the U.S.: The international usefulness of an American J.D.

In our discussion, we will use some acronyms. Here is what they mean:

TOEFL

Test of English as a Foreign Language. This is a test that international students are often required to take in order to demonstrate their proficiency in the English language. It is scored on a scale from 200 to 800. You can read more about the TOEFL [here](#).

IELTS

International English Language Testing System. This is a test that international students are sometimes required to take in order to demonstrate their proficiency in the English language. It is scored on a scale from 0 to 9. You can read more about the IELTS [here](#).

LSAT

Law School Admission Test. This is the test that all applicants to U.S. law schools must take. The LSAT measures skills deemed necessary for the successful practice of law: Logic, reasoning, and advanced reading comprehension. It is scored on a scale from 120 to 180. You can read more about the LSAT [here](#).

LSAC

Law School Admissions Council. LSAC creates and administers the LSAT, and also acts as an information clearinghouse during the law school admissions process, processing and assembling all of an applicant's documents and information, and then submitting them to law schools once the files are complete and the applicant is ready to begin the application process. You can access LSAC's website [here](#).

CAS

Credential Assembly Service. This is a service provided by LSAC that collects, summarizes, and combines all of an applicant's law school application information. This service is also in charge of summarizing and interpreting an applicant's transcript, and putting together a Law School Report with all of the applicant's information. The Law School Report is submitted to law schools during the application process. You can read more about CAS [here](#), and more about Law School Reports [here](#).

J.D.

Juris Doctor. This is the name of the degree first-time law students obtain upon graduation. It is required in order to practice law in the United States.

Now, let's answer some of the most common questions international students have about applying to law school in the United States:

Do U.S. law schools accept international students?

Yes, they do. In fact, many law schools pride themselves on attracting the best and brightest from around the world!

Will law schools help you get permission from the U.S. government to study in the country?

Yes, they will. In fact, you can only get a student visa through a U.S. educational institution. Once you are admitted, you will be contacted by the school with the paperwork you need to complete in order to apply for, and obtain, your official student visa.

What is the TOEFL, and why do some schools want it?

The TOEFL is the Test of English as a Foreign Language. It is created and administered by Educational Testing Services (ETS). The TOEFL is used to measure your English language writing, reading, and speaking abilities. Some schools require it because they want to ensure that you have the verbal skills necessary to succeed at their institution. Make sure to check with each school you are considering to see if they require you to submit TOEFL results; not all schools do. You can learn more about the TOEFL [here](#).

How can you study for the LSAT if you don't live in the U.S.?

First things first: We definitely want to underscore the importance of studying for the LSAT. It's a test on which you can do well and improve drastically if you study. However, for many international students, finding a way to study for the LSAT can be daunting, since many of the U.S. test prep companies do not have physical locations in foreign countries. However, this is not a problem: You can still study for the LSAT by using LSAT prep books (such as our LSAT Bibles), or participating in an online class (such as our Live Online LSAT Course, which is available worldwide, and taught live by our Senior LSAT Instructors). Making time to study for the LSAT should be high on your list of priorities—in order to be competitive in the law school application process, you need to have a high LSAT score.

Where can you take the LSAT if you don't live in the U.S.?

Depending on the country where you live, you may or may not have a designated LSAT testing center. You can view a list of testing centers outside the United States, Canada, and the Caribbean [here](#). If there is no testing center listed for your country, you may request that one be set up for you. Instructions on how to do that can be read on the LSAC website, [here](#).

Is your undergraduate (post-high school) degree acceptable?

Not all post-high school international degrees are recognized as sufficient by American law schools. For example, the Dutch Kandidaats diploma, or the Swiss Betriebsökonom are often not considered acceptable, among others. One of the first things you should do is contact the law schools you are interested in, and inquire regarding the validity of your undergraduate degree as it applies to your law school application.

How do your grades compare to those of U.S. students?

Often, the grading rubrics for international students are different than those used by American institutions (for example, you may be graded on a scale of 1 to 20, or 60 to 100, where most American students are graded on a letter scale of A through F, or a number scale of 0 to 100). However, you should not worry that your grades will be interpreted incorrectly—most admissions officers at U.S. law schools are well aware of the potential differences between U.S. and international transcripts, and they will also be given a Law School Report, which summarizes your academic performance in your undergraduate institution, by LSAC (to learn more about the Law School Report and LSAC’s Credential Assembly Service, as well as how it applies to international students, please read see “How does the Credential Assembly Service work for you?” below). It is a good idea, however, to also consider including a brief addendum with your application if your school uses a grading scale unlike those of American schools. In this addendum, you can explain how the grading scale works, and what your class rank was. In this way, schools will be fully informed on the intricacies and interpretations of your transcript, and how you compared to your classmates. You can read more about how LSAC handles international transcripts [here](#).

How do you submit your materials to law schools?

Most schools will require you to submit your materials through LSAC. In order to do this, you will need to sign up for the Credential Assembly Service, or CAS (read more on how you can do that [here](#)). You will then send or upload all of your materials (transcripts, letters of recommendation, essays, résumé) to CAS. It will then be assembled into one cohesive application package by LSAC, and will be sent on to law schools once your application is complete and you are ready to submit it for consideration.

How does the Credential Assembly Service work for you?

All U.S. law schools require you to use the Credential Assembly for your law school applications. This means that schools do not want you to send them materials via mail; instead, they want you to send everything to LSAC’s CAS, which will in turn compile it into one cohesive file and send it on to law schools once it is complete. For most international applicants, the CAS process has one additional step: Your documents will be evaluated through the Credential Assembly Service Authentication and Evaluation for Internationally Educated Applicants (CAS A&E). As per LSAC, if all of your bachelor’s-level work was completed outside the United States, its territories, or Canada, and the school(s) you are applying to requires that you use the CAS A&E, then your transcripts “are forwarded to the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), where they will be authenticated and evaluated. There is no charge for this evaluation other than the standard Credential Assembly Service registration fee. The data is assembled into a credential evaluation document that contains AACRAO’s summary, copies of the transcripts (and translations, as necessary), and a TOEFL or IELTS score, if applicable. All of these documents will be incorporated into the law school report.” You can read more about how the CAS Evaluation and Authentication feature works [here](#), and you can see a list

of law schools, and their requirements regarding the use of the CAS A&E, here. Almost all U.S. law schools either require or recommend the use of the CAS A&E by international applicants.

How will you pay for school? Can you get financial help from your law school?

Most U.S. law schools have no or limited financial aid funds for international students. In fact, many U.S. law schools may require you to submit, along with your application, proof of availability of funds to pay for the entirety of your legal education. In addition, international students do not qualify for educational loans from the U.S. government, which is how many American students pay for their legal education. As you consider whether you would like to pursue a J.D. at an American institution, also take a moment to consider how you will pay for it. In addition, contact each of the law schools you are interested in, and inquire regarding their financial aid policies for international students, and whether they have any institutional funds (i.e., monies that are available through the school) that you can apply for or get.

How useful will an American J.D. be to you?

As you decide whether pursuing an American legal education is the right step for you, consider the usefulness of an American J.D. in your country. Remember that American law schools teach American law, and that American law may not translate well, if at all, to the legal systems in your country. If you are seeking to practice law in your home country, you may want to do some research on how viable an American legal education is for you.

Applying to law school in the United States

Now that we've talked about the specific considerations international applicants should make when considering and applying to American law schools, let's talk about the application process itself. It is important to make sure you understand how the application process works for you, and what you will need to do to be successful at it.

The law school application process can be broken down into five steps:

1. Taking the LSAT.

2.Picking law schools.

3.Working on your applications.

4.Submitting your documents to LSAC through CAS, and having them evaluated by CAS A&E.

5.Sending your application to law schools.

We'll talk about each of them in more detail below.

Step one: Taking the LSAT

Begin by checking out [Getting Started with the LSAT](#), our starter's guide to the test. That guide will give you a solid introduction to what you need to know about the exam. Then, select the date on which you will take the test. The LSAT is administered four times a year: February, June, September/October, and December. Keep in mind that not all international testing locations administer the test four times a year; depending on which country you are in, you may be limited to only one or two administrations a year (you can see a list of international testing centers, as well as when they administer the LSAT, [here](#)). As a general rule, try to schedule your test as far in advance of your law school's application deadlines as possible, so that you can give yourself a good amount of time after your test to work on all the elements of your application.

Once you have selected a test date, you'll need to decide how you want to study for the test. You can choose to take a class, or you can choose to self-study using LSAT preparation books. If you choose to self-study, check out our [LSAT Self-Study Guide](#), and the [Three-Month Self Study Plan Using the PowerScore LSAT Bibles](#); those resources will be incredibly helpful to you as you prepare.

It is extremely important that you study thoroughly and diligently for the LSAT. Your LSAT score is the single most important part of your application, more important than your GPA, essays, letters of recommendation, or résumé. It is considered by law schools to be an indicator of first-year law school performance; a poor score tells them that you may not have the academic abilities required to succeed

at their institution. Your LSAT score can either get you into a top law school, or can keep you from getting an acceptance letter from any law school. The LSAT has also been considered to be an accurate predictor of future earnings potential.

A great deal rides on your LSAT performance, so preparing for the test should be at the top of your law school application list.

Are international applicants given more leeway in their LSAT scores?

No. Law schools expect all their students to excel at both the LSAT and their undergraduate performance. They will not make exceptions for low LSAT scores for international applicants or non-native English speakers, just like they would not make exceptions for American applicants.

Step two: Picking Law Schools

After you've settled on your LSAT date and prep, you need to start selecting the schools to which you will apply. This is important for two reasons:

1. It lets you think about what you consider important in a law school.
2. It will give you an idea of where your LSAT score should be.

How will picking law schools help me figure out where my LSAT score should be?

As you research law schools, you will not only learn about their academic environments, professors, locations, and student body. You will also be able to find out about their admissions policies—specifically the GPA and LSAT score ranges that they prefer when admitting students. Resources like LSAC's Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools will give you these numerical ranges, broken down into percentiles (25th and 75th). In order to be truly competitive at a school, your GPA and LSAT numbers should be at or above the 75th percentile. Knowing these numbers will make it easier for you to know where you should be aiming with your LSAT score, and how much you need to raise it (if at all).

Your law school list should be filled with institutions that you have researched thoroughly, you know will fulfill your academic needs, and you know will make you happy for all three years you are there.

Take a hands-on approach to the selection process, and spend as much time picking schools as they will spend picking you. This research is particularly important as an international student, since you won't only be attending a new institution, you will also be doing it in a country foreign, on your own. You need to look for institutions that will not only fulfill your academic goals, but will also give you the guidance and support system you will need as you acclimate to a completely new culture. Spending time determining your own preferences and thoroughly investigating schools will help to ensure your overall happiness with your choices.

Do not just limit yourself to reading school website. Also think about what you want, and how that ties in with what you are looking for from the schools you are considering. Do the following:

Conduct a Self-Evaluation

Take a long, hard look at what your priorities are in regards to academics, what your desires are regarding employment post-graduation, what makes you happy as regards living conditions, and what is important to you as a person.

Answer the following questions:

When you think about your future legal career, what do you see?

What are your interests? Is being able to continue your involvement with these interests important to you? It is important that you be able to continue them through law school?

What are your skills? What do you do well?

How do you learn best? Do you prefer a laid-back environment, or do you thrive on competition and pressure? Are you somewhere in between? What's been your most productive academic environment?

Do you care about rankings? Is the "pedigree" of your school and your degree important to you?

How important is the social aspect of a school to you? Is it important that you attend a school with a close-knit student body that is bonded together through multiple social avenues? Do you prefer a larger

school where you can focus on your studies and not worry about the social aspect of things? Is this something that is even important to you?

Where do you want to live for the next three years? Can you abide icy cold winters? Do you hate humid climates? Do you prefer big cities, or smaller suburban or rural areas?

What are your career goals? What do you hope to accomplish with your degree and your career? Where do you want to work: In your home country, or in the United States?

By answering these questions, you will get a good idea of where you want your law career to take you, and what is important to you in a law school.

CREATE A ROUGH LIST

After you've thought about what you want in a school, the next step is to create your initial "long list" of schools you are considering. You will need to use a number of resources for this first list, including LSAC's Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools, and a rankings list (typically the U.S. News and World Report law school rankings).

Using your answers from the questions above, start creating a list of schools that meet your criteria for any or all of the following aspects:

Geographic preferences

School size and social environment

Academic environment

Career preferences

Career aspirations and personal goals

Work opportunities during school and post-graduation

Personal skill sets

Starting from the top aspect (geography) and working your way down the list will allow you to narrow down schools based on your own preferences, ensuring that you are keeping with your ultimate, must-have needs.

GET DOWN TO SPECIFICS

Once you have created a rough list (usually anywhere from 20-25 schools, depending on geographic location and your numerical indicators), it is time to pare your choices down further. This will require investigation and research into each of the potential schools.

You should now consider the following:

What type of learning environment do you prefer?

What do you want to focus on or specialize in?

Where do you want to work during school and post-graduation?

This will allow you to shorten your list based on two very important fields: Academics and future career plans. A huge part of selecting a school is not only focusing on the three years you will spend studying the law, but also on the many years after school, when you will start, build, and focus on a career. The school you attend needs to be a launching pad for your future career aspirations.

Make the final decisions

Once all the information has been gathered, it is time to make the final decisions. Most candidates end up applying to 5-7 schools, although many end up sending applications to as many as 10, 12, or even 15 schools.

Your final list should look like this:

A few “definite” schools — These are the schools where you are almost sure to get in, based on numbers, credentials, and selectivity. Your numbers should fall at or above the 75th percentile, according to the numbers in LSAC’s Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools.

A number of “likely” schools — These are the schools where your numbers fall within the 50th to 75th percentiles (or above) for the numerical indicators, and where you feel fairly confident in your ability to gain acceptance, provided the “soft” aspects of the application (personal statement, résumé) are also well done. The bulk of your list should consist of “likely” schools.

A few “maybe” schools — Here, your numerical credentials are much closer to the 25th percentile (or slightly below), and you do not feel very confident about your admissions chances. “Maybe schools”

form part of the final application list in order to avoid missing out on a potential opportunity. Every year, unlikely candidates are offered admission to schools where their credentials did not give them a strong chance of admittance—why miss out on the possibility by not applying?

Step three: Working On Your Applications

To work on your applications, start by signing up for an LSAC.org account. With an LSAC.org account you can use LSAC's Credential Assembly Service (CAS) and apply online to law schools.

Schools make their applications available through LSAC starting in September and October. Although many schools give you the option of printing off a paper application and mailing it in, most prefer or require that you submit your applications electronically through LSAC.

Work on your applications after you have made your school selections. You can do this even if the current year's applications are not yet available, because almost all applications will ask for the same things, year after year:

The basic application form itself (mostly comprised of biographical information)

A personal statement

Letters of recommendation

Transcript(s)

LSAT score(s)

LSAC Law School Report

A résumé

Additional optional essay(s) and addenda (if applicable)

Let's talk about each component a little more in depth:

1. The application: This is found on the LSAC website, and is completed by you. It asks all the typical application questions: Biographical, academic, extracurricular, and conduct information. This can be completed online directly into the LSAC website (through your LSAC.org account), and saved.

2.The personal statement: This is an essay required by almost all law schools. It is written by the applicant and then uploaded onto the LSAC website. While it can talk about why you want to go to law school, it doesn't necessarily have to do so. Sometimes, schools have specific topics they'd like you to address, and will list those in the application instructions. If a school wants to hear about a particular topic, make sure your essay addresses it.

3.The letter(s) of recommendation: Most schools ask for 2-3 letters, although some may just want one (or none), and some may give you the option to submit as many as you want. You will request these from your professors or employers. These recommenders, after writing the letters, send them directly to LSAC, along with a cover sheet available on the LSAC website. You cannot send this in yourself. These are then processed by LSAC's Credential Assembly Service (CAS) and are added to your file. It can take LSAC up to 2 weeks to process these letters after they receive them.

4.Transcript(s): You request these from all undergraduate and graduate institutions you have attended. The institution submits them directly to LSAC, along with a cover sheet available on the LSAC website. You cannot send these in yourself. These are then processed by the CAS and are added to your file. It can take LSAC up to two weeks to process transcripts after they are received. Remember to check and see if your schools require you to use the CAS A&E service. If they do, make sure LSAC undertakes that evaluation for your materials.

5.LSAT score(s): You do not have to submit these scores to LSAC. LSAC, as the administrator of the test, already has these scores on file, and automatically links them to your file.

6.Law School Report: This is a report compiled by LSAC which includes your LSAT scores, LSAT writing samples, academic summary (a compilation of all your undergraduate grades), copies of all transcripts (undergraduate, graduate, professional), and copies of your recommendation letters. This is automatically put together by LSAC, and sent to each school you apply to. You do not send this in to law schools yourself; schools will request this from LSAC once they receive your application.

7.Résumé: You write it and upload it to the LSAC website.

8. Additional optional essay(s) and addenda (if applicable): These are essays a school requests in addition to the personal statement, or explanations needed due to issues in your academic, professional, or military career. You write these based on the requirements of each school, and upload them to the LSAC website.

You are responsible for completing the following elements of your application: The main application form, the personal statement, the résumé, and any additional essays and/or addenda. These elements are likely to match LSAT preparation as far as intensity of labor and consumption of time are concerned, so make sure that you budget enough time for them. A personal statement, for example, can take two months from brainstorm to completion; you will have to devote a great deal of time to brainstorming, choosing topics, outlining points, writing multiple drafts, and polishing final versions for each of these writing samples, and completing various drafts of your résumé.

The other parts of your application—transcripts, letters of recommendation, Law School Report—will be submitted or completed by others. Transcripts and letters of recommendation are submitted by the institutions you attended and the individuals writing your letters. The Law School Report is compiled by LSAC.

Once each of these elements has been completed and/or requested, they must be uploaded or submitted to LSAC. Only once all of the elements are processed can you send your completed applications to law schools.

Step four: Submitting Documents to LSAC

The submission of documents is the most important part of the process—after all, without all the proper paperwork and information on file, you can't apply!

LSAC and the CAS act like an information clearinghouse in the law school application process. LSAC compiles all the different elements of your application, puts them together in one cohesive file, and submits them to each of your schools once your file is complete.

Here's what you need to do and what happens with each element of your apps:

The personal statement, résumé, additional essays and addenda must all be written in a word processor and then uploaded by you to each application via your LSAC.org account.

Transcripts are requested by you from every undergraduate and graduate institution you have attended. However, they must be sent directly from the institution to LSAC; you cannot send them in yourself (so make sure that your undergraduate institution(s) do not send you the transcripts—they must send them directly to LSAC). Sometimes, transcripts may take a month or more from the original request to the time they are sent out, and they can take up to two weeks to process once CAS has received them from your undergraduate and graduate institutions. Make sure to give yourself plenty of time, and request these documents months ahead of law school application deadlines.

Recommendation letters will likely be the most time-consuming of all application components (aside from LSAT preparation). It can take weeks or months for a recommender to complete a letter, from your initial meeting with them to the writing of the final draft. The only “firm” timeline component is the length of time CAS will take to process and post a recommendation letter once they receive it. As per the LSAC website, “[it] takes approximately two weeks to process a transcript or letter of recommendation from the time it is received.” However, this can vary depending on the time of year and when in the admissions cycle the documents are being submitted, so make sure you give yourself plenty of time for the LORs to be written, submitted, and processed. It can also take a while for letters to get to LSAC if they are mailed internationally, so make sure to ask recommenders to write your letters well in advance of your law school application deadlines.

The Law School Report is compiled by LSAC once you’ve submitted all of your documents and taken the LSAT.

Step five: Sending Your Application to Law Schools

Once all of the elements of your application have been completed, submitted, and processed, it is time to send your applications to law schools. You also do this through LSAC; LSAC will electronically submit your documents to each of your schools. Everything is handled through your LSAC.org account: Payment for your Law School Reports and application fees, submission of documents, and processing of information.

Keep in mind that most law schools work on what is known as rolling admissions—this means that applications are considered as they “roll in,” rather than all at once after the application deadline. What does this mean for you? That by submitting your applications in at the start of the application cycle (which runs from September to about March or April), you will be competing with much fewer applicants for a much greater number of seats. Although this will not significantly increase your chances of admission, it will still give you a slight edge—and when vying for a seat at a top law school, every advantage (not matter how slight) is a good advantage.

After you have submitted your materials, all you have to do is wait for response letters from your schools. After you get all of your responses, carefully consider which one you would like to attend, send in your seat deposit to hold your spot in the class, and get ready to attend law school!

Useful Resources for International Applicants

On LSAC.org

List of LSAT test centers outside the United States, the Caribbean, and Canada

Requesting a non-published LSAT test center

How LSAC handles international transcripts

Special procedures for internationally-educated applicants

List of law schools that require the use of LSAC’s CAS authentication and evaluation service

Requesting transcripts (includes address that international students should have them sent to)

Choosing schools

[LSAC's Official Guide to ABA-Approved Law Schools](#)

[The U.S. News & World Report law school rankings](#)

[On PowerScore.com](#)

[LSAT publications](#)

[Live Online LSAT Course information](#)

[LSAT and Law School Admissions Blog](#)