Thesis and Research Guide

Representative sample of a real Pre-Law Blueprint deliverable. Client-specific names, local institutions, faculty, and research details are generalized or shown as bracketed placeholders; the structure, reasoning, and depth here are the real thing.

Why This Matters

Original research is the one part of your application that separates you from the vast majority of law school applicants. Most people apply with strong grades, decent LSAT scores, and a couple of internships. Very few have done real academic work on a topic they care about, produced something original, and built a substantive relationship with a faculty member in the process. That combination gives you three things a recommendation letter and a resume line cannot: a professor who can speak to your mind and not just your work ethic, an intellectual identity you can talk about in interviews, and (if published) a byline that signals you take ideas seriously. It also gives you material for the personal statement that goes beyond "I worked at X and it made me want to be a lawyer."

The Pathways

There are three formal pathways to producing original research as an undergraduate. They can be pursued individually, but the strongest applications combine two or three of them.

Departmental honors thesis. A structured, faculty-supervised research project that culminates in a written thesis and often an oral defense. This is the most formal and highest-status option. Check with your major department(s) about honors programs and eligibility (usually requires a certain GPA and involves an application). If your school offers an interdisciplinary or Honors College thesis option, that is also worth exploring.

Independent study with a professor. A less formal but very flexible option: you propose a research topic to a professor, they agree to supervise, and you earn course credit for the semester or year while you work on it. This can lead to a thesis or a publishable paper.

Research assistantship (RA). You work on an existing project run by a professor, often as part of their ongoing research agenda. Less independence than a thesis or independent study, but excellent for learning research methods, building the relationship, and getting your name on published work through a professor's byline or acknowledgment.

These stack. You can be an RA on a professor's existing research one semester and then propose your own independent study project on a related topic the next. A thesis in your senior year can grow directly out of the RA work you did as a junior. Working as an RA on a related project while doing your own thesis or independent study is one of the strongest configurations available to an undergraduate. Do not treat the pathways as mutually exclusive.

Choosing Your Topic

The primary destination for your research is the intersection of your two focus

areas. Every branch below sits at that seam or feeds into it, and the intersection is where your practical work (your current firm, your prior placement, and your advocacy role) all converges. That is the identity your application will project.

The supporting angles are each of your two focus areas on its own. A project in either angle is still valuable and still supports the arc: research in one area complements your firm work; research in the other complements your placement. But the intersection is where the strongest possible personal statement lives, because it is where the practical, the academic, and the personal all reinforce each other.

Pick a topic where you can produce original work, not where you would just review the existing literature. That means: a jurisdiction-specific question about your own city or state, a small-N qualitative study you can actually conduct, or an analysis of new data you can gather (case observations, policy comparisons, interviews). One guardrail, because topics in this area often involve minors and sensitive populations: do not collect, record, or quote identifiable case or interview data until a faculty mentor confirms what applies (IRB approval, court permission, or anonymization rules). Build that in from the start rather than discovering it late. The plan diagram is a menu, not a mandate; pick the topic that lets you do real work.

Intersection Topics (Primary)

Domain 1. Each domain below carries its own full bank of specific, answerable research questions, pitched at what an undergraduate can actually study in your jurisdiction; the banks themselves are withheld here. This one looks at how one system enters people's lives through the institutions of the other, with questions about local pipelines, referral patterns, and diversion-program outcomes you may be able to observe firsthand.

Domain 2. Follows what happens to the most vulnerable people inside the system and after they exit it, with questions about local outcomes, the effects of instability, and whether specific early-intervention programs change long-term trajectories.

Domain 3. Looks at the specialty and problem-solving courts built at the seam between your two areas: their design, their efficacy, and their outcomes, all topics where you can observe hearings directly, interview practitioners, and produce something that has never been written.

Domain 4. Examines the downstream household effects of system involvement, including cross-generational impact and how one area of law handles a party who is entangled in the other.

Domain 5. Sits where interpersonal harm and enforcement meet, including how parallel civil and criminal tracks coordinate (or fail to) and how recent statutory changes have affected specific vulnerable groups.

Domain 6. Follows how a single upstream driver, such as addiction, pulls households through both systems at once, including the design and efficacy of the specialized treatment courts built to respond.

Domain 7. Examines an adjacent body of law that overlaps with system involvement, with questions about how statutory rights are actually enforced for the populations you care about.

Domain 8. Focuses on the specific subpopulations where the intersection hits hardest, drawing on both local data and the national literature on the structural drivers of system involvement.

Supporting Angles

Focus area one only. Pure research topics in your first focus area. A project in any of these still complements your firm work and gives you deep expertise on that side of the equation. We identify the specific faculty across your departments and law school whose portfolios match, and note which are the natural supervisors.

Focus area two only. Pure research topics in your second focus area. A project here still complements your placement work. Again, we name the specific professors who fit and rank them by how realistic a supervisor each is for a pre-law undergraduate.

The Second-Major Track: A Distinct Set of Venues

If you have a second major (as many strong applicants do), it is not a side note here. It is a second, distinct angle on the same subject, and it opens a whole category of research and publication venues that single-track peers do not have. Many intersections are soaked in exactly the questions a second discipline works on, whether that is the normative and ethical questions a philosophy major would engage, the quantitative modeling an economics or statistics major would bring, or the historical framing a history major would add. We work out where your specific second major creates leverage on your specific topic.

A second-discipline paper does three things for you. It gives you a second, separately publishable piece of work; it demonstrates a distinct mode of reasoning that law schools prize; and it lets you pair one treatment of a topic with another, which is a genuinely distinctive combination for a law applicant. If you write in this lane, your second-major professors become a second set of potential mentors and recommenders, and a whole additional set of undergraduate journals opens up to you.

Doing Empirical Work Without Collecting Your Own Data

If you want to do quantitative work but don't have the time or approvals to gather your own data, you don't have to. Large, high-quality public datasets are analyzable from your laptop, and several map directly onto topics in this area: there are well-known national longitudinal studies and administrative-data archives that sit right on these questions, plus large free social-science data repositories where more can be found. Your mentor can point you to the right one, and jurisdiction-specific court or agency data may be reachable through a faculty project. Using an existing dataset turns "I have an interesting question" into "I have the data to answer it," which is what makes a thesis feasible in the time you have.

Faculty Roster: Who to Work With

Every research pathway requires a professor who agrees to supervise you. That relationship should be built well in advance of the project itself, ideally over the course of a full semester before you ask for anything. As part of your plan we build a ranked roster of the strongest-fit faculty across your undergraduate departments and your local law school, tiered by how realistic a supervisor each is for a pre-law undergraduate and annotated with what each one works on and why they fit your specific topic. The principles below are how we build and use that roster.

How the Roster Is Built

Start with your coordinator-professors. The single most valuable early relationship is usually a professor who both researches at your intersection and holds an administrative role (internship coordinator, undergraduate coordinator, honors advisor), because that person can help with placement, research, and eligibility all at once. We identify these people first and confirm the correct contact details, since a misdirected first email is a wasted one.

Prioritize newer clinic and lab directors. A newer faculty member building a clinic or research lab is often more open to a prepared pre-law RA than a long-established professor with a full bench. We flag these across your departments and law school as high-probability yeses.

Match named scholars to specific angles. For each of your research domains we name the specific professors whose published work sits on that exact question, so that when you approach one you can reference their work credibly and propose something adjacent to what they already do.

Map the whole field, then rank. We assemble the full set of relevant faculty, top-tier fits first, then strong fits, then secondary options, and annotate each with their research focus and the best way in. The goal is that you never send a cold, generic email; every outreach is targeted and informed.

A Note on the Literature

Some of the most relevant scholars won't be at your school. Part of building the roster is separating the people who can actually supervise you (local faculty) from the people whose work you should cite but who are elsewhere. We identify both, so your literature review is grounded in the leading work even when its authors aren't reachable as mentors.

Practitioner-Adjuncts Worth Knowing

The well-connected practitioner. Beyond research faculty, we identify practicing attorneys who also teach as adjuncts and hold bar or advocacy-organization leadership. People sitting at the exact intersection of practice, teaching, and reform advocacy are not research supervisors, but they are invaluable relationships for internships, referrals, and eventual recommendations.

How to Approach Them

Attend a professor's office hours at least twice before making any ask. Come with

real questions about their published work (which means you have to read at least one of their articles first). Express genuine interest in the topic and ask what current questions in the field they find most interesting. Only after you have established that you are someone who reads and thinks should you make the direct ask: "I'm interested in doing research on X. Is that something you would supervise, or could you point me to who would?" If they say yes, you have your project. If they refer you elsewhere, the referral itself is worth more than a cold email.

Two practical notes. Law school professors usually work with law students, but many will take a prepared pre-law RA: your professional experience, your clear interest at their research seam, and your two-to-three-year runway make you worth their time, so don't be shy, just come prepared and offer real work. And confirm names and emails before you send: rosters change between semesters, and addresses don't always follow the standard pattern, so check the current department directory first.

Where to Present and Publish Your Work

Research that lives in a drawer does nothing for your application. The point is to get it in front of people: presented at conferences, published in journals, recognized with awards. As part of your plan we lay out a full, tiered menu of venues, roughly in order of how accessible each is to a sophomore starting out. Read it as a menu, not a checklist. Your target is one solid presentation plus one serious written output over your remaining years, not every item. Even that much puts you ahead of nearly every applicant. The categories:

Start on campus (present).

- **Your undergraduate research symposium.** Most universities run an undergraduate research symposium (often several times a year) that accepts work at all stages, including literature reviews and works in progress, in poster and talk formats. This is your lowest-barrier first step: present here to get comfortable, then aim higher.
- **Your undergraduate law review or equivalent.** If your campus has an undergraduate law review or a departmental journal, it is a natural home for a shorter piece on your research theme, drafted in a single semester. Treat it as the first published output of your research trajectory, not a separate item.

Go national and disciplinary (present).

- **The national undergraduate research conference.** There is a flagship national undergraduate research conference that welcomes completed student-led work in every discipline; a national conference line on your resume is a real signal. Abstracts are typically due months ahead, so plan back from the date.
- **Regional disciplinary conferences.** Your work likely touches several fields, and each has regional conferences that are unusually welcoming to undergraduates. The rule of thumb: start with a regional conference you can do fairly independently, save the big national ones for co-authored work with a professor, and ask your mentor which specific venue fits your project. We identify the specific regional societies that map to your topic.

Publish (journals).

- **Your university's undergraduate research journal.** Many universities run their own cross-disciplinary undergraduate research journal, often a natural

home for your first full article. Your research office can point you to it and usually encourages submissions.
- **Field-specific undergraduate journals.** Beyond your own campus, there are well-established undergraduate journals in essentially every relevant field (justice studies, sociology, ethnography, psychology-and-law, philosophy, and several university-run undergraduate law reviews that accept submissions from students anywhere). We match the specific journals to the specific shape of your work.
- **A note on scope.** This is a sampling of categories, not the full list. Each field has more, and your faculty mentor (or your research office) is the fastest way to find the right current home once you have a finished piece.
- **Peer-reviewed professional journals, as a co-author.** You will almost certainly not first-author a professional journal article as an undergraduate, but co-authoring with your faculty mentor is realistic and is how most undergraduate names first appear in serious journals. These are the journals your potential mentors already publish in, which is exactly why the mentor relationship is the door into them. If your RA work contributes to a paper, ask your mentor about authorship or an acknowledgment.

Get funded and recognized.
- **Summer research fellowships.** Most research offices fund undergraduates to do summer research under a faculty mentor, often with a substantial stipend. These typically require presenting at the symposium afterward, which conveniently pushes your project through the present-and-publish pipeline.
- **Undergraduate researcher awards.** Many schools annually honor a top undergraduate researcher in your broad division with a prize. A realistic capstone recognition if you build a research record over your remaining years.
- **Conference travel grants.** Research offices and individual colleges often offer travel funding to present at conferences. Ask about current travel-support options before paying for anything yourself.

Timeline
The exact timeline depends on whether you graduate in two or three years, but the sequence is the same.
- **This coming semester.** Attend your target professor's office hours, read at least one of their papers, and begin the conversation. Also introduce yourself to at least one other professor whose work interests you, and consider reaching out to a law school clinic director. If you have anything presentable, put it in the next undergraduate research symposium just to get the reps.
- **Following semester.** Identify your topic. Propose an RA position or independent study for the next term. Consider applying for a summer research fellowship. Start reading widely in the topic area.
- **Junior year (or equivalent).** Do the RA work. Publish a shorter piece on your theme, and present at the symposium and ideally a national or regional conference. Begin planning the thesis if you're going the honors route.
- **Senior year.** Write and defend the thesis, or complete the independent study project. If publishable, submit to a peer-reviewed or strong undergraduate research journal, and consider a run at a research award. Present at a conference if the opportunity arises.
- **Application year.** The research is a finished piece of work that your

recommender can point to in a letter and that you can reference in your personal statement and interviews.

What Makes This Strong for Law School

A completed, substantive research project on your intersection does four things for your application. First, it gives you a recommender who can write in specific terms about how you think, not just how you perform. That letter reads completely differently from a generic professor letter. Second, it gives you an intellectual identity, a topic on which you are, at 22, actually knowledgeable. Interviewers can ask you about it and you will have real answers. Third, if published, it gives you a byline that positions you as a serious student of the field before you have even started law school. Fourth, it reinforces the coherent picture your entire application projects: someone who has worked every side of your field and has thought seriously about how it functions.

None of this requires you to become a career academic. The point is not that you love research. The point is that you took the time to do original work on a subject you care about, and that work says something about your seriousness that no resume line can.