

## Admissible Episode 1

---

**NATALIE** When I was studying for the LSAT, I was working as a paralegal the summer before my senior year of college. And I remember, I  
**BLAZER:** had my huge LSAT books stacked on top of my paralegal desk. And Mark Stancil '99, who was an associate at the time now he's partner. And he used to run our Supreme Court clinic. He's kind of a big deal in the law and a great alum of the law school, so he said, LSAT, huh? You should go to UVA Law. And lo and behold, that planted the seed.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

This is *Admissible*. I'm Natalie Blazer, Dean of Admissions at UVA Law. On today's episode, we're going to talk about all things related to standardized testing. Maybe you're someone who just took the September LSAT, and you're already thinking you may want to retake it. Or maybe you've never sat for the LSAT before, and you're gearing up for the October or November administrations this year or maybe even one early next year. Maybe you're planning to take the GRE or the GMAT. Whatever your situation, we in admissions that the topic of standardized testing is often at the forefront of our applicants minds.

Today's guest is second-year law student Sebastian van Bastelaer Sebastian graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Phi Beta Kappa in 2019. He majored in history and political science and minored in environmental studies. Prior to attending UVA Law, Sebastian worked as a research consultant for the University of Oxford. He also served as a program manager for the Constitutional Sources Project and as a legislative intern at the Wisconsin State capital.

Sebastian is also pursuing his master's in legal history concurrently with his law degree. Outside of class, Sebastian is on the *Virginia Journal of International Law* and serves as a peer advisor. I'm so thrilled to have Sebastian here with us today because he is someone who had two LSAT scores, one GRE score, and more importantly, a very well-written addendum addressing his standardized-test history. Welcome to *Admissible*, Sebastian.

**SEBASTIAN VAN** Thanks so much for having me.

**BASTELAER:**

**NATALIE** So before we dive into the testing questions, I want to remind our listeners that applying to law school is  
**BLAZER:** essentially about introducing yourself and trying to convey something about your personality and your motivation for pursuing a legal education. So Sebastian, can you quickly share with us one thing about yourself that you were excited to include in your law school applications?

**SEBASTIAN VAN** Absolutely, this may sound a little elementary, but I just wanted to get across the fact that I was a real person  
**BASTELAER:** and really sort of take admissions committees outside of the four corners of my resume. I ventured a joke or two in my personal statement just to try to break the ice, and in hindsight, that might have been a bit of a gamble in case it didn't quite land, but I was like, I want them to know that I'm the sort of person who's going to be enjoyable to be around, either because I'm making people laugh or because people can realize that there's someone less funny than them in the room.

**NATALIE BLAZER:** I love that, and I will say, at UVA Law specifically, and I think at a lot of law schools, we appreciate that. After 6, 7, 8,000 applications people start to look the same. And so when someone can interject a bit of their personality and especially sense of humor, we love to see that. It livens up our day, and certainly makes us take that step to potentially want to interview somebody.

OK, great, so now let's talk a little bit about the topic of today, standardized testing. Why don't you start by telling us your timing and your thought process? When did you first take a standardized test? And when was that in relation to actually submitting your law school applications?

**SEBASTIAN VAN BASTELAER:** So in the middle of college, in 2018, I took the GRE first. Obviously, the GRE is used for law school, as well as graduate schools. I was considering, at the time, both law schools and PhD programs. I was a history student in college loved that. I was considering doing that as a PhD. I'll use this time to plug the UVA Law and legal history masters because I thought that was sort of the best of both worlds.

But the GRE being that flexible test was really attractive to me. That's obviously a bit of a different test from the LSAT, but I think, taught me some good lessons about taking those tests, and ultimately, when I did apply to law school and did take the LSAT, I was able to also show this GRE score. And then I ended up taking the LSAT, first in October of 2020, and then retook it in January of 2021.

**NATALIE BLAZER:** So for our listeners, if you take the GRE or the GMAT, it's up to you whether to submit those scores to us. Whereas, on the flip side with the LSAT, you don't have a choice. So once you take the LSAT and assuming you don't cancel your score, we will see those no matter what, but if you have a GRE score that you want us to see, then you can submit that to us independently.

So Sebastian, tell us what you did to prepare for the LSAT the first time around. Did you take a course? Did you study on your own? Tell us a little about that process.

**SEBASTIAN VAN BASTELAER:** So I was mostly self-taught. I was mostly just doing a lot of practice tests. I thought that was a great resource because ultimately, as you will read and hear from people all the time, the LSAT is a learnable skill.

Very few people start out extremely proficient. I think that is something that separates it from say, the GRE. The LSAT is a completely different animal. And I think there's a huge return on investment if you're willing to put in that time. So I was doing a lot of that on my own spending whatever hours I could find in the day doing those practice exams and really trying to work at them.

**NATALIE BLAZER:** So tell us a little bit about your first administration of the LSAT, and why you decided to take it a second time.

**SEBASTIAN VAN BASTELAER:** So I had come in, again, having taken, I think, dozens of practice tests feeling ready to go, and I was doing the LSAT flex, so I was sitting in the basement of my parents' home, which was a weird sort of dichotomy of having this massive huge test in front of me while being surrounded by posters that have been on my wall since 2009. It was a bit of a weird contrast for me, but I came in, as I said, feeling pretty good.

And it went off the rails from the start. I had the logic questions first, the Logic Games. And in the course of reading one of the rules, I think on the very, very first, maybe the second, I read one of the rules to say either, when in fact, I noticed later, that it actually said neither. And as you can imagine, that really changes the rule, in fact, reverses the rule altogether.

And so I having apparently just skimmed these rules, started hammering away at these questions and quickly found out, using my strategy of trying to cross off answers that were incorrect, I kept coming across questions where they were multiple right answers or I was certain there was no right answer. And I was using up time, and my heart was racing, and I couldn't figure out what I was doing wrong.

I finally turned around, realized what I had done wrong. And by the time I'd redone the section, I didn't have time to get to the next section, and then I had several different LSAT sections left to go, at which point, I was already so disappointed in myself and so deflated by this situation, that I wasn't in a, I think, emotional or mental state to keep going, but I kept going and ultimately did far worse than I'd been doing on my practice tests, and that was extremely disappointing.

And I think with disappointments such as those, there can be a process of mourning. And for a while, I was like, maybe I'm just not cut out for this. Maybe I can't do this. If I can't take a simple LSAT, what am I doing applying to law school. And then I said, maybe I'll just apply with this score.

But I think ultimately, I realized, based on how I'd been testing based on how I felt I could have done if things had gone differently, if I had noticed the sort of phantom "n" in the rule, that I could have done better. And I think, one really important thing in this whole process is, knowing what your worth is and fighting for it because it can make a big difference in terms of being accepted or not accepted or being offered scholarship money or being offered none at all.

**NATALIE**

Yeah, I can imagine that was a very frustrating experience, and I think that is actually a classic example of when a retake is appropriate. Again, going back to when I was applying to law school, at the time, they averaged our LSAT scores. So people were very afraid to take the test a second time. Now, we are fortunate-- applicants are fortunate to be able to retake it and then schools will consider your highest score.

**BLAZER:**

So for the second time, it sounds like your preparation was not faulty. You felt like were fully prepared, but maybe it was just the test day experience. So did you do anything differently the second time? And tell us about the second time you took the test.

**SEBASTIAN**

So first I tried to put myself in a different environment for the test taking. I had done all my practice tests in that same bedroom, so I thought it would feel comfortable that way but I found myself-- when I took the GRE back in 2018, it was in a computer lab somewhere in a room I'd never been in before with blank white walls. And so I realized that I sort of needed to feel like I was in a test.

**VAN**

**BASTELAER:**

So it was good for me to move to a different room and strip the walls bare and make that my test room. I also hewed a little more closely to the actual format of the test. There are many, many books that LSAT puts out of practice tests, which of course are very helpful, but the test being online, I was a little unfamiliar with the little tools. And there's a little highlighter tool. And I was sort of using this very foreign tool when I did it the first time.

Ultimately, I ended up just paying for LSAT's pass to have all the practice tests available online. And then just reading the rules to myself over and over and over again. I think I've made a rule that you can't go to the question until you've read the rule three times because I was not going to let that happen to me again. So ultimately, it's about, I think, adapting to what went wrong the first time and really sort of being honest with yourself about what didn't work.

**NATALIE BLAZER:** That's great, and I think, due to the pandemic, LSAT has made a lot of changes to the format of the test. So definitely familiarizing yourself with the most updated format is a great piece of advice. So Sebastian, you did what a lot of applicants do, that I encourage applicants to do, which is you wrote an addendum addressing your standardized test history. Tell us why you thought it was important to do that and how you went about writing the addendum?

**SEBASTIAN VAN BASTELAER:** Sure, so as I mentioned in my previous answer, I knew what I was capable of and wanted to show that, but I think it's about going beyond, just saying, I did better the second time, so you should disregard the first one. I think you should be honest about what happened. Particularly, how you tried to address it and get better at it.

So I mentioned, I think, that I'd been practicing on paper. And I'd mentioned that I made a small mistake that compounded my pretest anxiety. And you don't have to be so explicit about, OK, this is what went wrong on the third question and the fifth question. I was a little unsure about these, no. I think it's about what specifically you did the next time.

And the gap between my first test and my second test was, frankly, enormous. So I felt like I had to explain that a little bit because if you make a mistake, people want to know how you're going to try to make sure not to let it happen again.

**NATALIE BLAZER:** That's so well said. And I think you nailed it when you just said, be honest. I mean, we're real people. A lot of folks who sit on the Admissions Committee have taken the LSAT, but one pitfall that sometimes happens when people try to write these addenda is, they say too much about, well, I have a lot of test anxiety. You have to think about the type of school you're applying to and what you're going to be asked to do and expected to do in law school.

Because if you just say that you were scoring very well on practice exams but get really anxious the day of the test, that's frankly, a lot of what you're going to be doing in law school is exam taking and being asked to perform under pressure, frankly. You don't get to take your contract's exam 10 times to get the grade you want. So I think it was very well said. And another thing that you did very well, which I always encourage applicants to do, is keep it short. A paragraph is more than enough.

**SEBASTIAN VAN BASTELAER:** Yeah, out of curiosity, you obviously, as a proud UVA Law alumna and now, as Dean, you've been on both sides of this. So when you're on that side of say, my application or an application with an addendum, how do you look at the multiple tests? I heard many, many different things as I was applying. And so I'd love to just hear from your side how you view that and any tips you might have on addendums?

**NATALIE BLAZER:** Yeah, so that's a good question because there is a lot of, I think, conflicting advice out there. So for anyone who's applying to law school, I would say definitely feel free to ask these questions of admissions committees. I think a lot of people approach it the same way, but might have nuanced approaches.

I think when I see, let's say, three exams on someone's CAS report on their standardized-test history, I think that's fine. When I really start to see more LSAT administration's, multiple other types of tests on the history, that's when I think it's a little bit more of a red flag. Again, I mentioned this before, you don't get to take your 1L exams five times to get the grade you want. You get to take them once.

**SEBASTIAN VAN**As much as I'd like some retakes some mornings.

**BASTELAER:**

**NATALIE  
BLAZER:** As would I. I would love to go back and do property again. But like you said, we have good days. We have bad days. At the end of the day, if you're really not moving the needle much, I think you just need to put your best foot forward in other elements of the application.

If your standardized test score is not where you want it to be, it's your job in the rest of the application to prove to us that you can do the work if your score is below our median, for example. Half the people who attend UVA Law are below the median. So remember that and know that, at the end of the day, it's one component. A well-written, honest, straightforward addendum can do a lot of work for you.

So I think we pretty much covered the questions that I had about your standardized test journey. I'm curious, Sebastian, what advice would you give someone who's thinking about applying to law school?

**SEBASTIAN  
VAN  
BASTELAER:** I think my first, to strain for another sports metaphor, is just to leave it all on the field. I really wanted when I sent in my applications, finally, to feel like I'd done everything that I could. And that goes back a little bit to the whole LSAT retake. I think if you really want something, you should also know your worth and ask for what you want.

I want to shout out my mom here because she, obviously, gives all the best advice and was in my ear the whole time. And when I was in that stage after my first LSAT feeling really deflated and saying, gee, I don't know if this is for me, or what if I just send in these numbers. They're fine. Why don't I just send these in and see what happens to me? And she said, you know what you want. Why don't you try for it? Why don't you try again? You what you're capable of.

And then so because I didn't apply until February, because I retook in January, I was rather late. The 2020 to 2021 cycle was extremely busy, I'm sure, for admissions committees with tons of applicants and class sizes fluctuating all over the place. It was mid-April, and I still hadn't heard back from a lot of schools, including UVA. But ultimately, I realized, UVA is what I want, and my mom was sort of getting after me a little bit and saying, why don't you reach back out to that admissions counselor? And I was like, look, I don't want to bother her. My applications there. They'll get around to it when they want.

Finally, after enough, let's call it prodding, from my mother, I was like, fine, I'll reach out to her and say, hey, it looks like it's probably not going my way. I might go to one of these other schools. I might take another year. If I take another year, how could I improve my application?

And soon she responded and set up a Zoom call, which I actually didn't know, was an interview at the time. But I was again, urged by people like, oh, put on a shirt, get shaved, look nice. And I was like, look we're just having a chat. She's just doing me a favor because I've been emailing her a few times in the cycle. I'm not expecting anything.

It turns out it was an interview. I was made an offer to UVA Law at that moment, which was, obviously, such a great experience. And she said to me later, what really moved the needle was you coming back at the end of the cycle and saying, this is still my top choice. I do have some other options on the table that I'm considering, but I'm wondering what else can be done there. Because I think that means a lot more in April than it does in September.

**NATALIE  
BLAZER:**

100%, and I love that story, and you're absolutely right about the timing. Everybody at the beginning of the cycle says that we're their top choice, until they get into Harvard and Yale and Stanford and all these other lovely places. But at the time that you reached out, you did have great options, frankly. Places that anyone would be fortunate to go to, but I remember your email specifically said, UVA is where I want to be.

And so when someone comes to us at that time, that speaks volumes, especially when they have a couple of other top-14 admissions in their pocket. And just a piece of advice for all of our listeners, yes, if anyone on my team asks to set up a Zoom with you one-on-one, you can assume that's an interview and prepare accordingly. Yes, so that's a really great piece of advice, as well.

So I agree with you 100% in terms of what you said about leaving it all out there. You don't want to have any regrets and think, what if I had sent that email? The 2020 to 2021 cycle was unbelievably competitive. We had applications coming out of our eyeballs, and we didn't necessarily have time to think through each single person and are they going to come or they're not going to come? Someone who's proactive like that, puts themselves on our radar.

Does it always work? No, of course not. You still have to be a very strong applicant like yourself. I'm sure a lot of people are aware that sometimes we assume if we haven't heard from somebody with a very strong application like yours, that they're going elsewhere. Again, we don't have the bandwidth to chase down people that we assume are going to another great school. So it's not always going to work. You have to have the application to back it up. But I think, leaving the cycle knowing that you did everything you possibly could is a great piece of advice.

The last thing I want to say, just to close out this episode, I think, probably a lot of listeners are wondering about this because it's out there in the universe. It's being discussed a lot. And that is this proposal from the American Bar Association, the ABA, that they're asking for people to weigh in on whether law schools should become test optional.

There are a lot of different viewpoints out there. I'm not going to espouse any opinion of my own or of UVA's. What I will say, I don't want any listeners thinking that this means that, in the next month, we're not going to require a test. That's really just not going to be the case. Even if the ABA does agree to adopt this test-optional policy, I can tell you that the vast majority of applicants are still going to have a test to apply with, and the vast majority of law schools in the near future are going to be looking at those scores.

So I just wanted to mention that because a lot of people are raising this question and asking me about it. And I would just say, for the foreseeable future, prepare as if you are going to need a standardized-test score because even if law schools adopt this policy, I can tell you that a score is going to be part of the vast majority of applicants files.

Thank you so much, Sebastian, for being here on the very first episode of *Admissible*. I'm so excited. And this was great. I think our listeners are going to benefit so much from everything you had to say.

**SEBASTIAN** Thanks so much, Dean Blazer.

**VAN**

**BASTELAER:**  
[MUSIC PLAYING]

**NATALIE**  
**BLAZER:** This has been *Admissible* with me, Dean Natalie Blazer, at the University of Virginia School of Law. My guest today has been second-year UVA Law student Sebastian van Bastelaer. For more information about testing requirements for UVA Law, please visit [law.virginia.edu](http://law.virginia.edu) and click on the JD Admissions tab.

The next episode of *Admissible* will be out very soon. And we'll be talking about why and how you should visit the law schools you're considering attending. Thanks so much for listening and please remember to leave us a review, wherever you listen to your podcasts.

[MUSIC PLAYING]