# Writing the Narrative for the Bar Exam/MPRE

The legal definition of a disability is a “physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities.” Major life activities include reading, thinking, learning, and concentrating, among other things like seeing, hearing, or walking. The narrative is your opportunity to tell your story in your own words, to make the case for yourself. In the narrative, you have to focus on the negative to make it clear how you are substantially limited in a major life activity. This is not the time to write about how you “overcame” your disability. This is different than how we in DRP work with students, where we focus on strengths. Here, you must convince the consultants/specialists who are reviewing your request that you require accommodations in order to have an equal opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge on the exam in question.

For students whose disability is developmental, meaning it arises in childhood like ADHD or a learning disability (even if you weren’t diagnosed until adulthood), writing the narrative is like telling your life story through the lens of “disability.” On the other hand, if you acquired your disability later in life you may have a brief sentence or two explaining how things were for you before becoming disabled by the acquired impairment. Then pick up on describing the onset of the impairment. It is generally best to organize your narrative chronologically, whether your disability is developmental or acquired.

For students who are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you don’t have to go into too much detail about the underlying trauma. A simple statement like “I was diagnosed at age 25 with PTSD due to a history of childhood abuse.” What you *do* have to spend time on is describing how the PTSD symptoms impact your day-to-day life as well as how they impact you in the academic setting and on timed exams.

Be mindful that writing the narrative can be emotionally draining, even triggering. Think about *when* you actually sit down to write the narrative; don’t do it just before class or before bed. Instead, plan on treating yourself to something nice/healthy after you work on it, to keep your spirits up. Also, as you write about all the ways your impairment “substantially limits one or more major life activities,” remember this is just one aspect of your disability and one part of who you are. You are writing this for a specific purpose: to convince the consultants who review your request that you are disabled AND require the accommodations you are seeking.

Here are my suggestions for how to organize your narrative and what to emphasize:

* Organize your narrative, use a header with your name and file number, and use headings, chronological is easiest and makes the most sense, usually.
  + You’ll want to show how your disability impacts you across different settings, not just in law school.
  + Start with childhood or elementary school, adolescence of middle/high school, college/undergrad, your experience taking the LSAT, law school (before and after accommodations, if relevant), law school exams, MPRE, studying for the Bar.
  + Include work/volunteer setting: how does your disability impact you in an occupational setting?
  + Does your disability impact you in social settings, or in personal relationships?
* **Describe** your symptoms, starting in childhood and continuing through the present. Give specific **examples**. Get granular. You are connecting all the dots for the consultants who will read your full petition. Just like in a law school exam, you don’t want to be conclusory.
* You may need to explain why you were not diagnosed/treated in childhood or adolescence. Family and cultural factors are relevant.
* The Bar's consultants tend to require "real-world impairment", like repeating a grade, failing a class, being unable to hold a job, etc.
  + Here, it's important to focus on (and describe, give examples) the negative. You don't have to embellish, but you do have to speak your truth. Don’t minimize. Give examples at every stage of life, and in different areas (social, occupational, academic, and extracurricular.)
  + Any third-party, corroborating evidence (of impairment) is good to include:
    - Any report cards with comments like, "XX is very bright, and a delight to have in class. However, he/she needs to stop bothering her neighbors/remember her homework/stay in her seat/stop

daydreaming/pay attention/stay on task/stop talking and listen" or something like that.

* + - Ever failed an exam? A class? Had to take late withdrawals? Any gaps in your educational career (like, taking longer to get your undergrad degree)? Include your transcripts & explain.
    - Ever gotten a poor performance review? Any evidence of that (email, formal review, letter, etc.?) Even if overall the review is glowing, a comment like, "You need to get to work on time," "You need to pay better attention during staff meetings," or "You need to adhere to deadlines" is important "evidence" of how the disability impacts you in a "real world" setting.
* You also have to explain how you have been successful. Even if they don't quibble over the diagnosis, they will say, essentially, that you are “not disabled enough." It is up to you to describe what it took for you to be successful. Everyone in law school works extremely hard. Every summer intern puts in long hours. If you have gone above and beyond, you need to explain that. If you have found ways (starting in childhood through now) to "self-accommodate," i.e., to manage or mitigate the impact of your disability, you need to describe that.
  + This includes examples like reading aloud or talking out loud to yourself to keep yourself focused and organized, foregoing extracurricular activities to study/work, breaking up study time/exam time by taking frequent breaks, vigorously moving or exercising or conversely, meditation and/or breathing exercises as a way of managing symptoms of anxiety, ADHD, or other disabilities.
* At the end of your narrative repeat your accommodations request clearly and provide a rationale for each request. The California State Bar does not offer "off-the-clock" breaks. Explain, in detail, why you need the time you are requesting and how you will use it. Yes, it becomes repetitive.
  + Consider if you want to request extra days to take the exam. That is, if you ask for 1.5x (50% more time) and they approve it, they might push you to finish the exam in 3 days, by splitting Day 1 into 2 days, but making you do all of Day 2 in the same day, i.e., 9 hours of testing. It’s grueling! Some rationales for requesting an extended day accommodation include:
    - Cognitive fatigue
    - Physical pain
    - Medications wearing off
    - Managing symptoms by needing to stick to a regular schedule with the same bedtime and wake time; regular meals; regular exercise; regularly scheduled “down time,” every day. A 9-hour day would mean that you start earlier and end later than other test takers. If deviating from such a schedule would have a “destabilizing effect” make sure that your doctor/specialist recommends a limit to how many hours of testing you should do in a day (e.g., “no more than 6 hours with a commensurate extension of days in which to take the exam.”)

GOOD LUCK! Let us know as soon as you hear back about your accommodation decision, so we can help you through the appeal process, if necessary!