

What Makes a Great Essay Great?

If you were an admissions committee member who had read thousands of Business School Applications, you would have an excellent idea of how a great essay looks and feels. Some committees have formal grading systems, others informal systems, to separate the great, the good and the not so good essays.

In assembling a business school class, the admissions committee looks for basic qualities such as leadership, integrity and team-mindedness. However, they are also interested in creating a lively, diverse community in which students will be able to learn from one another. The essays are your opportunity to demonstrate your skills and qualities to the committee, and to prove that you are an ideal candidate for their program.

While winning essays cannot be achieved by formulas per se, there are some basic concepts that form the basis of every great essay:

Answer the Question

The committee is asking specific questions because they want to know certain information about you. If there are multiple parts of the question, make sure to answer them all. The committee will notice your sins of omission, and will think twice about admitting someone who does not follow basic instructions.

Make Your Point Clearly

The committee has tens of thousands of applications to read. They do not have the time or the patience to figure out what you are trying to say about yourself.

Check for Readability

Remember that real people will be reading your application. Use good transitions to make your essay flow. Use the active tense. Avoid industry-specific jargon that might alienate your reader.

Demonstrate Your Skills to the Reader

It is not enough to assert that you have great skills and qualities; the reader needs evidence. Always provide specific support for your statements.

Choose Your Examples Carefully

Make sure that your examples highlight specific skills and characteristics that are important to the Business School to which you are applying. Try to choose examples that will make you stand out from the competition.

Respect the Word Limits

Good writing is generally concise writing. It is important to respect the committee's time, and to follow basic directions.

Remember the Human Factor

Imagine that you are a member of an admissions committee and you are reading your application. Do you sound like a real person? Are you sincere? Position yourself in a positive light, but avoid sounding arrogant.

Remember the Community Factor

Make sure to show how you will be a productive and contributing member of the Business School community.

The Art of Editing

Part of the challenge of writing great essays is covering all of your critical points in a limited amount of space. If you are more than five or ten percent over the limit, you will need to edit down the text. Here are some suggestions:

Make Every Word Count

Make sure that each sentence and clause leads the reader to the answer to the question. Tangents use up valuable resources.

Make Every Sentence Necessary

If you can eliminate a sentence without changing the meaning or tone of the story, then it is extra baggage.

Use the Active Voice

Passive constructions use many extra words and expressions.

Use More Efficient Vocabulary

Instead of using five words to express an idea, perhaps you can find one word that encapsulates the sentiment you are trying to convey.

Summarize your Story

Sometimes too much detail will detract from the main point of your essay. While you may feel that a play-by-play account is necessary, in many cases the reader will be able to understand your point if you describe it in general terms (ie, we discussed the pros and cons of the plan, vs he said this, I said that, he responded, etc).

A Matter of Style

You will need to adjust the style of your writing, depending on the length of the essays. Check for readability, flow and good transitions, as well as positive tone. Here are some tips:

Short Essays (300-400 words)

These essays are tightly written by necessity. Choose the scope of your answer carefully, as each word is a precious commodity.

Medium Length Essays (500-750 words)

These offer a bit more breathing room. However, beware of the multiple-part essay! You may have to answer two or more related questions in one essay of medium length. Put together the core essay parts that you have perfected, but pay special attention to transitions and consistent tone.

Long Essays (1000 or more words)

Long essays take just as much discipline as very short essays. A generous word limit does not mean stream of conscious style writing. Make sure you have a detailed outline. Many long essays contain multiple part questions, but don't make the mistake of pasting together a series of short essays. Keep the content and the examples that you have perfected, but loosen up the style, otherwise your essay will be too dense to read easily.

Core Essays

You'll need solid building block to create your masterpiece. Before you tackle the tough three- or four- or five-part essay questions, you'll need to refine each segment of your "story."

We suggest that you start by creating a series of Core Essays. These are the common topics that every Business School asks for, every year, in one form or another. This way you can polish the elements of each basic story and then modify with respect to each school, depending on what the school's profile warrants. While you absolutely must tailor each application to each Business School, adapting an excellent Core Essay to highlight leadership, entrepreneurial spirit, independent thinking, humane management skills or change through teamwork will be much easier than starting over each time.

Perfecting a series of Core Essays will also help you answer all parts of every essay question. Failure to answer the question or questions asked in an application essay is the fastest way to ruin your chances for admission.

Here are the core questions for the majority of the top Business Schools. Pay close attention to the translations; they are the hidden questions to which the admissions committee really wants the answers. Make sure to provide the necessary support to back up your story.

To create Core Essays, plan to write 200-300 words for each segment. For multiple-part essays, you need to combine two or more parts for an essay of 500 to 1000 words.

Your Career and Your Future

Question: Please describe your past experience/career to date.

Translation: Have you progressed in your career in terms of responsibility and leadership?

Provide Support: How have you developed your technical and interpersonal skills?

Question: What are your future career goals?

Translation: Do you have a well-thought out plan; is this a goal for which an MBA is necessary?

Provide Support: Is this plan realistic/achievable based on your background, skills, and experience?

Question: Why are you seeking an MBA?

Translation: Can you demonstrate that an MBA is part of a rational career progression?

Provide Support: Can you show that your career goals would not be obtainable in your stated timeframe without an MBA?

Question: Why are you interested in this particular MBA program?

Translation: You must demonstrate how you are a good fit and a good risk for the school

Provide Support: Consider demographics, experience, values, process, and approach to problem solving

Question: What will you contribute to the MBA class?

Translation: What will your classmates will learn from you inside and outside the classroom

Provide Support: Demonstrate your leadership and teamwork skills, as well as interesting hobbies

Your Accomplishments

Question: Describe a professional accomplishment where you demonstrated leadership

Translation: Business schools are looking for leaders

Provide Support: What have you done that demonstrates your ability to lead a group?

Question: Describe a professional accomplishment where you demonstrated management ability

Translation: Business schools are in the business of shaping senior managers

Provide Support: What have you done that demonstrates your ability to manage people, resources, and situations?

Question: Describe a professional accomplishment where you demonstrated teamwork

Translation: Business Schools are looking for people who can work well with others

Provide Support: What have you done that demonstrates your ability to work within a group?

Question: Describe a situation where you created change in an organization

Translation: Do you have the vision to see that change is necessary?

Provide Support: Do you have the political/interpersonal skills to convince others to follow your plan?

Question: Describe your most significant personal accomplishment(s)

Translation: Describe an achievement that highlights the personal qualities valued by Business School

Provide Support: Show your perseverance, ability to overcome obstacles, integrity, etc, in addition to your intellectual prowess

Your Failures

Question: Describe a professional failure and what you learned from it

Translation: Have you learned a lesson that is important to a leader?

Provide Support: You have the right values for Business School

Question: Describe a personal failure and what you learned from it

Translation: Have you learned a lesson that pertains to the personal skills that matter to Business Schools (follow your dreams, maintain integrity, never give up)?

Provide Support: You have the right values for Business School

Question: Describe a challenge to your values/ethical dilemma

Translation: How strong is your commitment to your core set of values?

Provide Support: Can you respect others' values, especially when they differ from your own?