



BUSINESS SCHOOL ESSAYS

Writing Strategies
to Help You Excel



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You've worked hard to achieve a good GMAT score and beef up your resumé as you prepare to apply to your top-choice MBA programs. While you've got those components out of the way, you might still need the element which could make all the difference between an acceptance and a rejection from the admissions committee: your business school essays.

Business school essays are program-specific and are geared towards helping admissions committees understand who you are and how their institution can help you reach your goals. In order to answer these prompts, you need to frame the biggest factors behind your choice of a school in terms of how they align with your personality and aspirations.

You must take advantage of this essay component to give admissions committee members a concrete and memorable idea of who you are. To guide you through what to expect, we've outlined the 2019-20 prompts for the top 20 MBA programs, how to answer common questions, explained the importance of the essays in the admissions decision, along with sharing some final tips to aid you through the process.

PROMPTS FOR TOP SCHOOLS

Here's the thing: not all business schools ask for the same essay. In fact, for most schools, you have to answer multiple short prompts that add up to convey a bigger picture of who you are. While the prompts and word limits differ, they all ask questions which help provide context for other parts of your application, as well as demonstrate how you would fit into the school. Without further ado, let's look at the prompts assigned by the top 20 business programs for the upcoming cycle:

1 University of Pennsylvania (Wharton)

MBA Essay Prompt

What do you hope to gain professionally from the Wharton MBA? (500 words)

Describe an impactful experience or accomplishment that is not reflected elsewhere in your application. How will you use what you learned through that experience to contribute to the Wharton community? (400 words)

2 Stanford Graduate School of Business

MBA Essay Prompt

What matters most to you, and why?

For this essay, we would like you to reflect deeply and write from the heart. Once you've identified what matters most to you, help us understand why. You might consider, for example, what makes this so important to you? What people, insights, or experiences have shaped your perspectives? (750 words)

Describe your aspirations and how your Stanford GSB experience will help you realize them. If you are applying to both the MBA and MSx programs, use your essay to address your interest in both programs. (400 words)

3 Harvard Business School

MBA Essay Prompt

As we review your application, what more would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy for the Harvard Business School MBA program?

There is no word limit for this question. We think you know what guidance we're going to give here. Don't overthink, overcraft and overwrite. Just answer the question in clear language that those of us who don't know your world can understand.

3 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Sloan)

MBA Essay Prompt

MIT Sloan seeks students whose personal characteristics demonstrate that they will make the most of the incredible opportunities at MIT, both academic and non-academic. We are on a quest to find those whose presence will enhance the experience of other students. We seek thoughtful leaders with exceptional intellectual abilities and the drive and determination to put their stamp on the world. We welcome people who are independent, authentic, and fearlessly creative—true doers. We want people who can redefine solutions to conventional problems, and strive to preempt unconventional dilemmas with cutting-edge ideas. We demand integrity and respect passion.

Taking the above into consideration, please submit a cover letter seeking a place in the MIT Sloan MBA Program. Your letter should conform to a standard business correspondence, include one or more examples that illustrate why you meet the desired criteria above, and be addressed to the Assistant Deans of Admissions, Rod Garcia and Dawna Levenson (300 words or fewer, excluding address and salutation).

3 University of Chicago (Booth)

MBA Essay Prompt

How will the Booth MBA help you achieve your immediate and long-term post-MBA career goals? (250 word minimum)

Chicago Booth immerses you in a choice-rich environment. How have your interests, leadership experiences, and other passions influenced the choices in your life? (250 word minimum)

6 Columbia Business School

MBA Essay Prompt

Through your resumé and recommendations, we have a clear sense of your professional path to date. What are your career goals over the next 3-5 years and what, in your imagination, would be your long-term dream job? (500 words)

Why do you feel Columbia Business School is a good fit for you? (250 words)

Who is a leader you admire, and why? (250 words)

6 Northwestern University (Kellogg)

MBA Essay Prompt

Kellogg's purpose is to educate, equip and inspire brave leaders who create lasting value. Provide a recent example where you have demonstrated leadership and created value. What challenges did you face and what did you learn? (450 words)

Values are what guide you in your life and work. What values are important to you and how have they influenced you? (450 words)

6 University of California - Berkeley (Haas)

MBA Essay Prompt

What makes you feel alive when you are doing it, and why? (300 words maximum)

At Berkeley Haas, we are redefining leadership. We value different opinions and perspectives, recognizing that we always have more to learn about others' lived experiences and histories. We encourage speaking up and listening, and courageously use our power to address barriers and drive change for positive impact.

Tell us how a Berkeley Haas MBA would enhance your leadership profile, incorporating specific examples. (300 words max)

9 Yale School of Management

MBA Essay Prompt

Describe the biggest commitment you have ever made. (500 words)

10 Duke University (Fuqua)

MBA Essay Prompt

Why is pursuing an MBA the right next step for you? (500 characters)

What are your post-MBA career goals? Share with us your first-choice career plan and your alternate plan. (500 characters)

10 University of Michigan - Ann Arbor (Ross)

MBA Essay Prompt

Michigan Ross is a place where people from all backgrounds with different career goals can thrive. Please share your short-term career goal. Why is this career goal right for you? (300 words)

Select one prompt from each group of the three groups below. Respond to each selected prompt in 100 words or less (<100 words each; 300 words total). Every word counts here — the tight word count is intentional to force you to focus.

Group 1

I want people to know that I:

I made a difference when I:

Group 2

I was humbled when:

I am out of my comfort zone when:

Group 3

I was aware that I was different when:

I was challenged when:

12 Dartmouth College (Tuck)

MBA Essay Prompt

Tuck students can articulate how the distinctive Tuck MBA will advance their aspirations. Why are you pursuing an MBA and why Tuck? (300 words)

Tuck students recognize how their individuality adds to the fabric of Tuck. Tell us who you are. (300 words)

Tuck students invest generously in one another's success even when it is not convenient or easy. Share an example of how you helped someone else succeed. (300 words)

12 New York University (Stern)

MBA Essay Prompt

What are your short and long-term career goals?

How will the MBA help you achieve them? (500 words)

Describe yourself to the Admissions Committee and to your future classmates using six images and corresponding captions. Your uploaded PDF should contain all of the following elements:

- A brief introduction or overview of your "Pick Six" (no more than 3 sentences).
- Six images that help illustrate who you are.
- A one-sentence caption for each of the six images that helps explain why they were selected and are significant to you.

12 University of Virginia (Darden)

MBA Essay Prompt

Darden strives to identify and cultivate responsible leaders who follow their purpose. Please provide an example of a situation in which you have made a meaningful impact. (200 words)

Diversity and inclusion are critical to our mission, and they work best when they are an integral and celebrated part of our community. Read University of Virginia's Commitment to Diversity Statement. Share a time in which you engaged with a perspective, identity, community or experience that was different from your own and how it impacted your worldview. (200 words)

The Batten Foundation Worldwide Scholarship provides all Darden students in our full-time MBA program with an opportunity to participate in a Darden Worldwide Course. If you could choose any location in the world, where would you want to travel, and why? (50 words)

Tell us what you would want your learning team to know about you — personally, professionally, or both? (100 words)

What is your short-term, post-MBA goal and why? (150 words)

15 Cornell University (Johnson)

MBA Essay Prompt

At Cornell, our students and alumni share a desire to positively impact the organizations and communities they serve. How do you intend to make an impact during the next several years of your education and/or career? (350 words maximum)

The front page of your resumé has given us a sense of your professional experience and accomplishments as well as your academic summary and extracurricular involvement. If the back page reflects “the rest of your story,” please help us get to know you better by sharing ONE example of a life experience, achievement, or passion that will give us a sense of who you are as a potential community member.

A statement of your goals will begin a conversation that will last throughout the admissions process and guide your steps during the MBA program and experience. To the best of your understanding today, please share your short and long term goals by completing the following sentences and answering the enclosed short answer question (350 words maximum):

Immediately post-MBA, my goal is to work as a(n) [Role] at [Company] within [Industry].

Targeted Job Role:

Target Job Company:

Industry:

In 5–10 years post-MBA, my goal is to work as a(n) [Role] at [Company] within [Industry].

Targeted Job Role:

Target Job Company:

Industry:

How has your experience prepared and encouraged you to pursue these goals?

16 University of California - Los Angeles (Anderson)

MBA Essay Prompt

Tell us about your MBA goals AND why you are applying to UCLA Anderson now:
Describe your short term and long term goals (150 words maximum)

Why is UCLA Anderson a good school for you? (150 words maximum)

At Anderson, we believe our students are engaged, courageous, humble, and open. Describe a time when you demonstrated one of these traits in your personal life. (250 words maximum)

17 Carnegie Mellon University (Tepper)

MBA Essay Prompt

At Carnegie Mellon University's Tepper School, we value our community and it is important for each person to contribute to its success. What difference will you make as a member of the MBA class at the Tepper School? (Maximum 350-500 words.)

17 University of Southern California (Marshall)

MBA Essay Prompt

What is your specific, immediate short-term career goal upon completion of your MBA? Please include an intended position, function, and industry in your response. (100 words)

Please draft a letter that begins with "Dear Admissions Committee" (word limit: 600)

This letter is meant to be your personal statement that provides the Admissions Committee with an understanding of your candidacy for Marshall beyond what is evident in other parts of your application. This essay is purposely open-ended. You are free to express yourself in whatever way you see fit. Our goal is to have an appreciation for and an understanding of each candidate in ways that are not captured by test scores, grades, and resumés.

19 University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill (Kenan-Flagler)

MBA Essay Prompt

Please respond to the questions below that will assist us in learning more about you (Required, 500 words):

Tell us what your immediate career goals are and how you will benefit personally and professionally from earning an MBA at Kenan-Flagler Business School.

As the business world continues to evolve, circumstances can change and guide you in a different direction. Should your goals that you provided above not transpire, what other opportunities would you explore?

Please select one topic below and respond to the prompt. (250 words)

Topic 1: What is one thing that we do not know about you that you want us to know?

Topic 2: Provide us an example of a time you were able to be creative with your work. What was exciting or difficult about it? Did you achieve the results you were looking for?

Topic 3: Tell us about a time when you felt or witnessed someone being marginalized. How did you feel? What did you take away from the experience and how has it encouraged you to be an inclusive leader?

MBA Essay Prompt

Please introduce yourself (250 words)

Picture yourself at graduation. Describe how you spent your time as a Texas McCombs MBA to achieve your personal and professional goals. (500 words)

As you can see, essay prompts and lengths vary from school to school. One personal statement won't cover all of the MBA programs on your list! Nor can you copy one essay and directly paste it for another prompt, as you have to be specific to each school and its specialties.

HOW TO TACKLE COMMON PROMPTS

Now that you've read the prompts you're likely to encounter, it's time to analyze how to answer them. For any business school essay, it's important to think about the following:

1. Who you are
2. What you've done so far
3. Where you hope to go
4. How an MBA from the school of your choice can help you reach your goals

To further break down specific ways to answer some common questions, let's look at how to answer three typical MBA prompts you'll almost certainly have to tackle.

THE “WHY OUR SCHOOL” ESSAY

Anyone can say they want an MBA from a top school. The “why our school” essay is your chance to convince admissions committees that you've done your research on their program and are convinced that this is the institution for you over any other. Each school frames it differently, and assigns their own limits such as:

Penn: What do you hope to gain professionally from the Wharton MBA? (500 words)

Columbia: Why do you feel Columbia Business School is a good fit for you? (250 words)

There's no beating about the bush. You've made a choice to apply to the program, so make it clear why you've done so. Writing this essay will also prepare you to confidently back up your decision if you are invited to interview with the school. This is your chance to demonstrate that you know the program and aren't writing generic statements which can apply to any MBA. Whether it's Columbia's [J-Term](#) or the [Harvard Business School Case Method](#), know what opportunities you can receive at the school whose essay you're tackling that you can't find anywhere else.

Most importantly, remember that this is your business school application. Just outright stating that these resources are great won't do. You have to tie them to the experiences you've had, the kind of business you want to engage with in the future, and how these resources can help you get where you want in your career. How can the school of your choice help you hone your teamwork skills? Is there a particular leadership program at the school that can benefit your long-term plans? Show the admissions reader that you know the opportunities inside out, that you're aware of exactly which fellowships or seminars are perfect for you, and in turn, outline how you can contribute to the class environment.

THE CAREER GOALS ESSAY

For a lot of schools, the career goals and “why our school” questions are fused in one prompt. A few of the top schools ask you to write about where you see yourself at various points in the future:

UCLA: Describe your short term and long term goals (150 words)

UVA: What is your short-term, post-MBA goal and why? (150 words)

While attending business school and receiving an MBA can open you up to new career possibilities, admissions committees want to know that you're an ambitious, reflective, and driven individual. Since you've probably taken time to step into the workforce for a few years, you should use this prompt to connect these dots and your forward-looking vision. If your word limit is restricted, don't focus too much on the past. Mention the most meaningful aspects of your work experience or the field you wish to join, describe your biggest aspirations, and how an MBA from the specific school can help you get there. If a school has asked the “why our school” and career goals questions separately like Columbia has, make sure you haven't repeated any information; each essay should convey something new.

Similar to the “why our school” question, the career goals essay also provides great practice for your interviews because schools will undoubtedly want to hear more extensively about what you've done where you plan to go, and how the institution fits into it all. A carefully written response can help you set up a compelling answer for your interview. So, make sure you don't exaggerate or write about anything you can't elaborate on if faced with the question in person.

THE “TELL US WHO YOU ARE” ESSAY

The “tell us about yourself” or “introduce yourself” questions can seem broad. Where do you even start? Schools frame this type of question very simply, or sometimes in unconventional ways:

UT Austin: Please introduce yourself (250 words)

NYU: Describe yourself to the Admissions Committee and to your future classmates using six images.

However worded, it's time for you to reflect on what makes you a unique, memorable candidate when compared to thousands of others from all over the world.

The key to writing such an essay is to stay organized. Don't write down every single thing you've ever done in your response. Take a hint from the Cornell Johnson prompt: “Please help us get to know you better by sharing ONE example of a life experience, achievement, or passion that will give us a sense of who you are as a potential community member.” When you've got limited words and readers with very little time on their hands, you need to narrow it down to the most compelling aspect about yourself.

Think about leadership opportunities, honors and awards, and your family background. You could talk about your biggest passion and how it arose, you could talk about any experience which has shaped your perspective, or you could talk about your family background and how it has directed your career choices. No matter what you cover in your essay, you have to make sure it paints a memorable picture. Using anecdotes to drive your points home is an effective way of showing rather than telling. If you want to talk about work experience, make sure you're not just writing about how you worked at a consulting firm where hundreds of your peers have also worked. It won't help distinguish you to admissions officers. In fact, it might just do the opposite. You have to find a unique spin.

Make sure your response has a clear focus, so that the admissions committee members will be able to remember you easily once they've finished reading.

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUR BUSINESS SCHOOL ESSAYS

What Admissions Officers Look For

Your business school essays make up one of the most important components of your application, as they provide admissions committees the chance to understand your personality, figure out what matters to you, and gauge whether you would be a good fit for the school. No matter how strong your grades or test scores are, weak responses to essays can definitely prevent you from making it to the acceptance pile. Remember, your business school essay is not the place for you to explain why you have shortcomings in your application - schools typically have a separate addendum section for that. If your topic and writing are stellar enough, admissions committees might overlook slightly lower numbers. Of course, you need to work on your other elements as well, but the essay acts as a highly valuable opportunity to differentiate yourself.

When reading your essays, admissions committee members look to get a greater sense of who you are and how you've taken steps to pursue your interests. While your resumé outlines what you've done so far, the business school essays tie the most important pieces of it together to portray why your experiences matter. It's crucial that you expand on a story that is your own - not your parents' or your friends' - and one which helps admissions committees understand you beyond your grades and consulting experience.

Business schools have specific characteristics that they look for in students, for example, Harvard Business School wants leaders who can thrive in a fast-paced environment and actively collaborate with their community. So, an important part of school research is ensuring that you know what kind of characteristics the school wants you to bring, and letting those traits shine in the anecdotes and points you bring up in your essays.

FINAL WRITING TIPS

- **Authenticity and Uniqueness are Key** - Trying to figure out what admissions officers want to hear, instead of actually reflecting on your career and goals, is the wrong way to approach business school essays. Your MBA essays should stand out as your chance to tell business schools your unique story. Think about whether or not your response will help you become a memorable candidate in admissions officers' eyes. If you have a professional or personal experience that you know your peers won't have, that's what you should consider writing about in your essays.
- **Be as Specific as Possible** - Saying you want to work in consulting or in investment banking once you've received your MBA is far from enough. It tells nothing unique about you. Why do you want to work where you do? What kind of consulting firms are you looking for and why? How do you hope to leverage your experiences and education to create something bigger? The more specific you are to your own goals and story, the more you can stand out to the reader.
- **Start Writing with Plenty of Time in Hand** - If you're applying to a handful of business schools, chances are you'll have over 10 essays to write! In order to make sure all of your essays are as polished as possible; you need to give yourself plenty of time to work on each carefully. So, don't wait until 3 weeks before the deadline to start. Plan ahead and put your best efforts into convincing admissions officers why you're ideally suited for their MBA program.

Business school essays provide a great opportunity to emphasize your individuality and supply context on how your background, work experiences, and interests can contribute to the MBA program, as well as the world of business once you've graduated. Think carefully about topic choices, and let the admissions committee know that there's more to you than just your grades and work experiences. Show that you will prove to be a wonderful asset to their institution.