

Writing Effective SOPs for B-schools

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You have taken the GMAT, reviewed the application material from various business schools and have attended the receptions. Now is the time to start writing the all important admissions essays that most US business schools require. As you begin to write them, I sure most of you wonder about: What goes in them? Who reads them? How are they evaluated?

Almost every top business school has a different set of criteria to review the essays that they receive. Most of them ask applicants to write 3-4 essays on different topics. Richard Montauk's "How to get in the top MBA program" discusses the types of essays the top business schools request in considerable detail. However, there are other evaluation factors that are usually not highly publicized. For example, each school decides on the profile of the entire class for that year before the application process even begins. So *Business School A* may decide that for the incoming class in 200X they want to have a higher proportion of students from an entrepreneurial background. In addition to that, applicants are evaluated with respect to other applicants with a similar background. An Indian applicant with an IT background will be evaluated against other Indian applicants with IT backgrounds.

Most of the top business schools in the US receive 10 times as many applications as there are seats for any given year. Also most of these applications are read and reviewed by at least 2 to 3 different individuals in the admissions committee. Usually, the first two reviewers are second year MBA students who will spend about 30 min reviewing each application, and the third reviewer is a full-time member of the admissions committee. **Also remember that the application process typically starts towards the end of September and runs till late April, a period of 7 months.** And as you can imagine, the job of reviewing application essays probably gets tedious after a certain point in time. Why is this important to a potential applicant? If you as an applicant are aware of how your application is evaluated then you are better prepared to

structure your application essays better and make them stand out. So how exactly do you organize your essays?

I am sure no applicant fails to mention unique achievements in his application essay, and doing so is a good thing. However, just mentioning the achievements or successes in an application essay does not make the application great. Let's take an example. Let's say that one of my application essays just highlights that I developed a complex software systems and how complex this system is. Now imagine that if the evaluator reading my essay does not have any exposure to technology at all. What kinds of questions will be raised in his/her mind?

- ▶ Why was the development of this complex software system important?
- ▶ Did developing the system help the firm in some way: increased revenues, decreased costs, etc.?
- ▶ What challenges did the applicant have to overcome to develop this system? Did the applicant work with a team to develop this system?
- ▶ Could the system have been developed by someone other than the applicant having similar experience and skill set? If so then what was the unique contribution of the applicant?
- ▶ What did the applicant learn from this experience?

And since, I have already submitted my application I have no way of addressing the questions that an evaluator may have while reading my essays. The end result is that I have missed an opportunity to leverage my achievements and present myself as a more complete individual to the evaluators and instead I have submitted yet another application from an Indian applicant with an IT background.

One approach that I have found useful while doing my application essays is to follow the **Context, Action, Result, Learning (CARL)** format. For every achievement that I wanted to highlight in an essay, I first laid out the **context** in anticipation that the reader might not have the same background as me. Then I mentioned my **action/contribution** that led to that achievement, and finally how that achievement **benefited** the firm and

me. Lastly, I mentioned what I **learnt** from that entire experience.

Wherever possible, it is also important to link each event that is being presented based on two things: (a) The business school to which I was applying, and (b) How that accomplishment is related to future career goals.

If you know how your application is evaluated, you will definitely have a leg up as you prepare your essays. I have presented a structured method of composing application essays that helped me during the application process. In fact, I have used the same format to compose my resume and cover letters for admissions to Michigan Business School. I wish you all the best in identifying an approach that works for you and good luck in your application process! ■

