

**The Nine Commandments:
A Guide to Writing Better Business School Essays**

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If you're smart, you're already asking yourself: "Why should I believe any of this?"

I'll tell you where it comes from, then you can decide if it's worth your time. First, I attended a business school that is almost always ranked in the Top 10 in almost every ranking system around. So I know what it's like at one of those schools. Second, while in school, I was on the committee of students that reads applications and interviews prospective students. Finally, I have done some additional work off and on for companies that charge people like you hundreds and hundreds of dollars to evaluate and consult on your business school applications. So I have literally read hundreds of essays for business schools.

So, that said, here's the most important thing I can tell you about business school application essays: Most of them are not very good. In fact they are bad. About a quarter of them are almost unreadable. If you are applying to business school, this is actually good news for you.

Why? Because when most of your competition is mediocre, it is easy to stand out. That's not to say that the people you are competing with for admission slots are mediocre people or not accomplished. Probably the opposite is true; but a large number of very good applicants do themselves no favor by putting together weak applications. That creates an incredible opportunity for you, and one you can easily take advantage of.

The bad news is that if you've already written your essays, they are probably not very good. Even without reading them, I'm pretty confident of that assertion. Why? Because of the 250 or so business school essays I've sifted through maybe 10 were good. That's 4% and statistically 4% means "not yours."

Fortunately most business school applicants commit the same mistakes over and over, so their essays are weak for the same reasons. There are actually two positive consequences of this. First, it makes it easy to tell you what you've done wrong in your essays without even reading them. Second, it makes it equally as easy for you to not only correct your essays but also avoid writing ones that read like everyone else's. That will give you a definite advantage when it comes time for the admissions committee to compare your application to the rest of the pool.

What follows is a list of commandments—nine of them (with the last being specific to non-native English speakers)—based on the most common mistakes found in business school application essays. You might not think any of them are applicable to your essay. Think hard about that because, again, very few essays are really top notch. Every one of the commandments should at least give you something to think about.

I Answer the Question

This sounds obvious. It is in fact obvious, so obvious that right about now you're probably feeling like you are wasting your time. That's what makes it stunning that so many people actually fail to properly answer the question. It's baffling. Maybe people are too attached to what they want to say that they don't realize that it's not really relevant.

More likely is that they are lazy.

Say you've already written one essay for another school's application. That same essay almost answers the question for the application you are currently working on. You copy and paste. You think it's good enough and why do the same work twice?

It's not good enough. When you "almost" answer the question it's blatantly obvious to someone reading your application that you tried to shortcut it. So not only have you written a bad essay that doesn't really answer the question, you're not winning any points for initiative either. You have to fight the temptation to take the path of least resistance here and put in the time necessary. If you can't show you're willing to do the minimum amount of work required to get in, you're telling the admissions committee that you're not worth admitting.

If you are unsure, you can tell if you are answered the question in Five Easy Steps. Unfortunately it involves bothering someone else and subjecting them to what you've written. Still, if you can find someone to help you, then do take advantage of them for your own benefit. Here are the Five Easy Steps:

Step 1: Give your essay to someone else to read.

Step 2: Do NOT tell her what the question you are answering is.

Step 3: Have her read your essay.

Step 4: When she is done reading, have her guess what the question was.

Step 5: If she got it right, congratulate yourself. You answered the question. If she got it wrong, go rewrite your essay.

“Right” in Step 5 is a subjective term. Obviously, she doesn’t have to get it verbatim. She just has to be mostly right. There is also a little grey area here. Some schools ask notoriously open-ended questions like: “Tell us about your family” or “Tell us your life story.” Okay, it’s not that ridiculous but it’s not far off. In those instances if your reader comes back with a question that is more specific than the above don’t worry.

If you don’t have someone you feel comfortable giving your essay to, then be sure to go back periodically and reread the question while you are in the process of writing your essay. Again, it sounds stupid, but what happens is that applicants write something that more or less answers the question, then they edit and revise the essay once or twice. Often times they edit and revise out the sentences that included the key ideas that address the question. So whereas they started with something appropriate, successive edits may have resulted in a better sounding essay, but one which no longer answers the question.

Other obvious things that shouldn’t need to be pointed out: 1) Answer all parts of the question and 2) Answer only the question. You might see two-part questions like: “Tell us about a time when you exceeded your own expectations. What did you learn from the experience?” Answer both parts. Again, I can’t believe I am having to say this stuff but you’d be amazed and how many people fail to talk about things they learned from the experience.

Finally, if the question is something like: “Tell us about your future plans and why you need an MBA to accomplish them” (Limit 1000 words), don’t spend the first 800 words talking about things you have done in the past. Your work history is probably relevant in such a question, but it’s maybe about 200 words relevant, if that. The question is about the future, not the past, so that’s where the bulk of the attention (and words) should be.

Just answer the question they ask. It’s not hard, but it’s stunning how so many people fail at this simple task.

II. Depth over breadth

Sorry to bring up memories of your high school guidance counselor, but this is maybe the most important of the commandments and many b-school applicants seem to have forgotten about this idea from back in the day when they were applying to college, or maybe it didn't even register the first time. The idea here is don't talk about a lot of things, instead talk about one thing in depth. Another way—in fact a better way—to think about this rule might be: Tell stories.

If you claim you have a certain characteristic—'I am patient,' or 'I am generous,' or 'I respect those working below me as much as my supervisors'—tell a story that illustrates that characteristic in action. If you have a number of interests outside of work, don't try to talk about all of them but pick one and talk about it in detail. Do you volunteer? Tell the story about the one person whose life you changed by doing community service. Depth over breadth. Tell stories.

Here's an example. Let's say the essay topic is some variant of "Tell us about yourself." You have a myriad of interests so you write:

I am a competitive masters swimmer. I like playing no-limit hold 'em. And I read this great book because I really like reading. I even took what I learned from that book and applied it at work. Oh, and this other time at work I went to a meeting and had a suggestion that everyone loved so much I won an award at the end of the week. It's my proudest accomplishment except for this one time at band camp...

Stop. Okay, that's bad. Admittedly it's an exaggeration but it's to make a point. You haven't told the reader anything about yourself other than, "I like a lot of stuff." Instead, pick one thing you like, say, skydiving. Now tell the story about the first time you ever went skydiving.

I had never even entertained the idea of skydiving until some of my friends pitched in and got me a first-jump package for my 25th birthday. When we set a date to make the jump, I acted very cavalier, saying, "This is so cool. Awesome guys. Thanks, I can't wait." In reality I was suppressing my absolute horror, thinking, "Okay, I'm going to jump out of a plane at 14,000 thousand feet and

accelerate toward the ground at a rate of 32 feet/second² with the only thing separating me from certain death being a sheet that may or may not pop out of a bag on my back." I was terrified. But I couldn't back out because I had already made myself out to be a tough-guy daredevil who was excited about this and, more importantly, two of my friends were coming with me to watch. We got up the morning of and drove to the site, which was about 50 miles outside of the city...

It's not going to win any literary awards, but it doesn't have to. You are just trying to get in to business school, not win a Pulitzer. The important thing is that now you are 'somebody' in the reader's mind. You are the guy who conquered his fear and now skydives once a month.

True story: I once recommended to admit a person who had absolutely no business getting in to school if you were going strictly "by the numbers." He had an average GPA and a below average GMAT score. But in my head he was (and still is) the hedge fund guy who volunteered for the Surfrider Foundation and wanted to take inner-city kids surfing so that they would stop killing each other. That was two years ago, and I still remember him because he was interesting.

That's why you tell in-depth stories. You have a better shot of being interesting. That matters when the reader gets to the end of your application and it's time for him to decide whether you are an 'admit' or a 'deny.'

One more thing: be careful about telling a really good story, then, when closing, making claims that aren't supported by or contained in the story. For example, someone might write an essay about how he learned patience by teaching kids in Sunday School. He tells a nice story about this experience, then, in the closing paragraph adds something like, "Teaching Sunday School also improved my leadership skills and helped me learn how to motivate others as well as become more creative in dealing with other people's problems."

Huh? You wrote an essay about learning to be patient. You never once mentioned leadership skills or motivation. Why are you making these additional claims that have nothing to do with what you wrote? This happens all the time. You might be all of those other things, but don't blurt them out unless they are supported by what you wrote.

III. Target your school

There is the right way and the wrong way to go about targeting your school.

Here is the right way: Kellogg has been at the top of the Business Week rankings for MBA programs for the last two ranking cycles. Does that mean that Kellogg is the best business school?

It doesn't matter because that's the wrong question to ask. The question to ask is: "What's the best business school *for me*?" If you are thinking, "I want to get into some aspect of entertainment and media." Why would you want to go to Kellogg? Its strength is in marketing. You would probably be much better off going to NYU or UCLA.

So if you really know what you want to do, or even if you are not sure but you have an inkling, look at schools that excel in your chosen field. This is going to require a little research. Read the bulletin. Look at the course offerings. Read the biographies of the faculty. Look at the industries where the graduates get hired. The schools aren't hiding this information. They probably sent it to you when you requested the application. So take the time to read it.

Doing this will make your life so much easier. First off, you won't throw away two years of your life and \$100,000 going to the wrong school. Second, it will also help you write better essays as tailoring your application to your school won't be difficult. The school teaches what you want to learn. Its program is perfect for you and you are perfect for it. Third, schools love it when you massage their egos; and they want to be wanted. Finally, average essays sound better than average when they read like they were written specifically for a school.

Now, if you are not sure what you want to do, you can still go about this the "wrong way" and be successful. Pick the school you want to get into, whether it's for the right reason or not, then tailor your application to play to that school's strengths. This does mean you are still going to have to do some research to find out what that school is good at. Once you do that, you are home free, no matter what your background.

Example:

I spent the last three years as an engineer designing chips for a semi-conductor company, but I plan to switch careers and want to become an entrepreneur in the high tech industry. Your business school with its center for entrepreneurship and its close cooperation with the computer science department at the university is the perfect fit for my future plans.

You've never started a business, in fact, you have almost no business background but, ta-dah, you've made it a non-issue.

You are allowed to pander—"I have read working papers by professor Smalicz and am looking forward to taking classes from him as well as some of his younger colleagues on the faculty doing cutting edge research in venture philanthropy"—just don't overdo it—"I'm excited about taking classes 20224 and 20245." Knowing the faculty and what they are famous for is good. Pulling course numbers from the catalog and putting them in your essay is bad (might seem obvious, but I've actually seen someone do it).

Just make your essays fit the school. Not all questions will allow you to do this, so don't force it. If they ask you, "When you were a child, what did you dream of being when you were older?" Don't say, "I can recall sitting in my kindergarten class and thinking, 'When I grow up, I want to be in private equity,' which is why I want to attend Stanford." No, you wanted to be a fireman or an astronaut or Michael Jordan (if you grew up in America as a boy, that is; if you grew up in Australia maybe you wanted to be Don Bradman).

Even if you are not sure of what you want, at least try to make a list of what you don't want. If you don't like numbers and don't want to do math, then don't apply to the University of Chicago. Again, you can save yourself a lot of money and a couple of now-miserable years out of your life.

Finally, if from your application essays it looks like you have no idea what a school's strengths are, you are really in trouble. So even if you can't tell a compelling 'why' story at least make it obvious that you know what the school is known for.

IV. Watch your language

Take this quick, one question test.

What is the difference between the following two sentences?

"I told my manager that we could increase sales by about 10,000 units per quarter if we got the item down to a price point of \$12."

"I told my manager that we could increase sales by about 10,000 units per quarter if we got the item down to a price of \$12."

Answer: There is no difference between them.

In fact, I defy you to come up with one sentence in which using "price point" instead of "price" makes more sense. It's a two word phrase that has somehow taken hold in the business world even though it is linguistically equivalent than the one word it replaces. Maybe people think it makes them sound smart. It doesn't.

In itself, it's pretty harmless, but these terms have a habit of accumulating in language, and when you start stacking them up you end up with sentences like: "Because of the fast-paced environment where technologies changed so rapidly that formal training was almost non-existent, I had to think outside the box and become proactive in learning from senior engineers so that I could integrate myself and become a more productive member of my team while also leveraging that newly-acquired knowledge to increase my value-add to the company from a human resource standpoint."

And what are you really saying with that sentence? "I took the initiative to teach myself about new technologies. This made me more valuable."

That first sentence has 65 words. The second one (okay, technically two) has 15 words. If you make someone read 65 words of tedious business-speak over and over again to say what you could in 15 simple words you are going to annoy them. Annoyed readers are less likely to recommend to admit an applicant who annoyed them. (Oh, one more thing, you're not applying for a spot with the Denver Nuggets. You don't have to continually make a point that you are a "team player").

Be mindful of what you are saying. Read your own essays and if you come across a long or unnecessarily wordy sentence ask yourself, "What am I trying to say with that sentence?" If you are really making a very simple point, then go back and put that simple point in simple words.

Finally, if you use clichés, stop.

V. If you are funny, be funny

There is very little to say on this to elaborate, but I'll try anyway.

You can't really teach humor, but if you got it, use it. Don't flaunt it, but a couple of well placed jokes or clever lines can really set your essays apart.

The application reading room is only a funny place for unintentional humor (See Commandment VII below). If you can make someone laugh reading your essay for something other than an egregious error, you take about two steps ahead of everyone else.

Here's why. Most essays are tedious. Don't believe me? Try reading this paragraph:

At Smith-Jacobs I was responsible for leveraging all of our current technologies into emerging markets so that we could increase margins without having to incur any additional research and development expenditures. This became critical to both our short term and long term growth strategies because we had begun to outsource so much of our engineering that we moved backwards down the learning curve. This not only jeopardized the technology advantage we held over our competitors but also placed more pressure on exiting product lines.

I don't even know if that makes sense. It does, however, make my head hurt. Reading essays often means reading paragraph after paragraph after paragraph like the above. It's like listening to Alan Greenspan, only worse. At least when Greenspan reads he is doing the work for you.

An essay with even one funny remark can be a Godsend, but do not overdo it. Remember, jokes are like beer. After a two or three you are social and chatty and having a wonderful time. After 17 you are passed out drooling on the bar and embarrassing yourself. So if you are funny it's good to throw in a laugh or two. It's not okay to make your essay one long running series of bad "Take my wife... please" jokes. That's irritating.

This rule does have a corollary: If you are not funny, don't try to be funny. Seriously. Don't.

VI. If all of your essays are about work, consider getting a life

As part of your application you will likely have to submit a resume; describe your work history, including position, responsibilities, and dates of employment; and get two letters of recommendation, which will probably come from supervisors at work.

Your work history is all over your application. If you think about it, before you even write a single word of any essay, your application is your personal information (name, address, phone number), your numbers (grades and GMAT), your work life and lots of it. Moreover, at least one of your essays is probably going to force you to talk about work (because every school asks you why you want to get an MBA). So why do you take the only place left they give you some latitude to talk about your personality—what makes you “you”—and spend it talking about work?

It makes prima facie sense as most of what you do is probably tied up in your career. Wernham-Hogg is where you’ve faced difficult situations, overcome obstacles, dealt with interpersonal issues, and maybe even faced ethical dilemmas. The problem is that the same is true of almost every b-school applicant and most of them feel compelled to write about it.

So for a very popular question like: “What was a difficult situation you faced and how did you overcome it?” Somewhere in the neighborhood of 85% of the responses will write something along the lines of:

We were on a tight deadline for a project that could make or break our company. We were days away from the last meeting with the client when we discovered a serious flaw in the methodology used for all of our sales projections. On top of that two team members were starting to allow personal difference to impact the performance of the group. The situation was deteriorating rapidly at the time when we most needed to function as a cohesive unit and correct our prior mistakes.

Applicants usually continue on with stories of how they stepped into a phone booth, pulled off their business casual attire to reveal blue tights and a cape, and saved the day for everyone.

If you can't find something else to talk about or you can't come up with other places in your life where you deal with similar issues, you will A) sound amazingly similar to most every other applicant and B) you will bore the crap out of whoever is reading your application (which we have already established is bad). It's that simple. And it's not just that you look better when you can talk about any number of subjects, you look bad when all you talk about is work.

So what else do you do? Do you read? Do you paint? Do you volunteer? Do you travel? Do you exercise regularly and participate in 'fun runs'? What?

And I'm not here to be your life coach, but if you really don't have anything but work to talk about, then maybe consider waiting a year before applying to business school. The school isn't going anywhere. Take some time in that year to pursue outside interests, or get involved in a community service organization. You might not seem that broad in your application because, well, you're not.

If you dedicate some time to trying new things you will be much better off when you come back to apply again. It's not just that you will have something interesting to write about next year, you will probably be a more interesting person. And that's what business schools want; they want interesting people. Well, actually they want overachievers, but interesting overachievers.

VII. Do not say things that are wrong

Admittedly, this is a bit of a stretch to get a couple of almost-related ideas under one heading. But these types of mistakes can be fatal and are easily avoidable.

First, proofread your essay. You are probably writing your essays using Microsoft Word. It has a spellchecker. Use it. But do not be fooled into thinking everything is fine just because you don't see any of those squiggly red lines when you are done. What you don't know is that you have might have more errors than you think you do, way too many to count.

That was on purpose.

Your computer doesn't know when you should use "there" instead of "their" (or even "they're"). Also look for misuse of "it's" and "its;" or "two," "to," and "too." And "thing" instead of "think" (or vice versa) typos are also common.

If this is something you really want in life, don't you think you can take an additional 30 minutes and proofread your own essays? (Note, this might make me a hypocrite but I absolve myself of any such errors as I only made a cursory attempt at proofing this. Hey, you get what you pay for).

And don't just proofread for grammatical errors. Fact check your essay as well. Sound stupid? Not as stupid as the following types of errors. First—and this happens with alarming regularity—are sentences that read something like, "After graduating from the University of Texas' McCombs School of Business I plan to launch a start-up that helps recent immigrants pool resources so that they can start their own businesses." Sounds fine except for the fact that this sentence was in an essay for the Marshall School of Business at USC. Cutting and pasting of essays happens all the time as many schools have very similar essays. Admissions offices are well aware of it. They generally don't care, though, because they don't know if you are copying and pasting unless you forget to do something like change the name of the school. This sort of carelessness is fatal.

Second, there was a question when I was evaluating applications in high school (and this is paraphrasing) that asked if you, the applicant, could be present at any moment in history, which would you pick and why?

The applicant responded that he would have wanted to be present when the Space Shuttle first landed on the moon.

You might think, "Yeah, that's a little vague. Did he want to be on the moon when it happened? Or did he just want to be alive at that point in history to witness it on TV" Of course the perceptive among you should be thinking: "Uh, dude... the Space Shuttle never landed on the moon."

From a reader's standpoint, it was one for the wall. The walls in the reading room at school were painted white every year and the best gaffes got Sharpied right on to the wall for all to read and enjoy. From the applicant's standpoint, that one factual error killed any chance he had of getting in. If he had said that he wanted to be there when Apollo 11 landed on the Moon or he wanted to be there to see the first Space Shuttle blast off from Cape Canaveral, he would have been fine. Either is a perfectly acceptable topic for an essay.

So you might think you know what you are talking about, but fact check or give your essay to someone else to look over, just to make sure you didn't have a complete brain fart and say something monumentally stupid.

The second part of "Don't say things that are wrong" is don't tell lies. You would think this goes without saying but it happens.

If you're flat out lying to get into business school you're not only failing your first business ethics test, but eventually you will get found out. Then you will have bigger problems to deal with. Now, certainly, there is embellishment, and by all means, talk up your accomplishments, but don't over-embellish with the intent to out and out deceive because you might also get found out. That will also be fatal.

It happened to someone whose application I happened to read.

Someone basically had my old job at a competitor. It was the exact same gig with the exact same responsibilities. It was a stepping-stone job, but it was the necessary starting point. There were about a half-dozen companies doing this, and there was almost no differentiation between tasks at competitors. I knew because I had friends at every one of them. So when he wildly exaggerated what he actually did and what his duties consisted of—he basically described his boss' job—I knew.

You might think, "Wow, that's bad luck. If anyone else had gotten that application, he would have been fine." You're right. He would have been. He would have even sounded impressive. But I read the application; and he wasn't part of the next year's class. The point is that if he told the truth he would have been fine no matter who read the application. It would not have been that big of a deal for him to say that certain aspects of the job were menial, but it was a means to an end. And every one who was on that career path, started in that same place. There's no shame in that.

Tell the truth. Period.

VIII. Do not say you have great analytical skills or you are creative

This rule should really be called: "Don't say things that go without saying." It could also be a more general rule like, "Don't make stupid claims" These just happen to be my two favorite examples of stupid things that you shouldn't say.

So you think you've got great analytical skills? So what? I've got a little secret for you. Ready? Because this might really upset your entire world view. Almost everybody applying to the top business schools is pretty smart. Some of them are even smarter than you. And almost all of them have "great analytical skills." Take a minute to digest that. Take another if you need to regain your equilibrium.

Okay, continue.

Having good analytical skills isn't something that makes you special at this level. Nobody is going to look at your essay and, when they get to the line where you write, "I've got great analytical skills," stop reading, pick up the phone to call you, and congratulate you for getting into Dream Business School. Having those strong analytical skills—thinking critically, finding solutions to problems in ways others around you couldn't,, understanding root causes, etc.—is a prerequisite for getting in. If you don't have them, you are in trouble, if you have them you don't need to point it out to anyone.

Now maybe at your job you demonstrated your great analytical abilities by coming up with a novel way to do something that saved your company millions of dollars. Great. Then you can tell the story "How I came up with a novel solution to the problem of updating bank software and saved Initech millions of dollars" (remember Commandment II). That's fine. Just talk about what you did and how it impacted your work situation and be done with it.

As for being creative... This is (almost) verbatim from an actual essay: "I often come up with creative ways to save time on small tasks in the work place that prevent people from being productive. I also am very creative when it comes time to hand out office awards at the end of the year. My favorite award from last year was: Best Use of a Toner Cartridge."

I'd like to share the rest of the essay with you, but a) who really cares about the toner cartridge and b) I'd prefer more to avoid the

manslaughter charges I'd inevitably be hit with for boring you to death. Just thinking about the rest of the essay has me on the verge of a nap.

If you are creative than you don't write essays that are so boring they are painful to read, although it does give claim the added feature of being self-defeating. If you are creative, then you just are; and that will come out in the fact that wrote a creative essay. You approached the question in a way that no one else thought of, or you came up with an original answer. That's creativity and it literally goes without saying.

Here are some other stupid claims to avoid:

- 1) "I have unique perspectives." This is usually followed by some really banal observations. If you really do have unique perspectives then just say things that no one else says, which will make them unique.
- 2) "I can make a valuable contribution to the [insert school name here] community." First, how do you know? Second, do you think they want students who don't contribute?.
- 3) "I am a risk taker." Actually, if you were a risk taker, you would be taking risks and not applying to business school, which is really a haven for risk-averse people.
- 4) This isn't really a stupid thing that people say, but don't start your essay with a famous quotes or quote someone famous. There really isn't anything wrong with it, but it just seems like 90% of the time someone does it,, the quote is completely irrelevant to the main point of the essay. You do not make yourself sound smarter by association.

IX. Do Not Use a Thesaurus

This rule is primarily for foreign students.

Take a look at this paragraph:

Following standard practices, we estimated the incremental economic effects of the proposed port, that is the economic benefits and costs with the port compared to those without it. Benefits and costs include potential market impacts as well as environmental costs examined from the viewpoints of the government and the developers. This analysis of the project took almost a year to complete.

Now compare it to this paragraph:

Subsequent standard practices, we expected the incremental economic property of the proposed port, that is the cost-effective remuneration and overheads with the haven compared to those without it. Benefits and costs include latent bazaar impacts as well as green costs examined from the viewpoints of the regime and the developers. This scrutiny of the project took somewhat a year to put the last touches on.

The first paragraph is completely intelligible English. The second is complete gibberish. It makes almost no sense. The only difference is that about a dozen words were changed using a thesaurus.

That's what happens when you use a thesaurus if you are not a native English speaker: You get yourself in trouble and end up with a paragraph like the second one above. It's something that happens to foreign students all the time. And whoever ends up reading your essay is going to spend as much time and energy just trying to figure out what you are trying to say as she is evaluating the actual content of your essay. As a result, she will invariably get irritated and have a hard time judging you fairly.

How to avoid this problem? Easy. Don't pick up a thesaurus or don't use the one built in to your computer. More helpful advice: 1) Keep your sentences short and to the point, using words that you know. 2) Have a native English speaker read your essay after you are done.

If you are not a native speaker, whoever is evaluating your application will likely know it (or be able to guess it pretty quickly). He will not expect you to dazzle him with your prose and might (repeat: might) even tolerate minor (repeat: minor) mistakes.

Now some of you might be using dictionaries because you just don't know the English language well enough. That's understandable, but you still need to be careful.

Quick story: My brother was going to visit some friends in Yugoslavia (this was back when there was still a place called Yugoslavia). Anyway, he had tried to pick up a little Serbo-Croatian before going and, in advance of the trip, decided to write his friends in their native language. Here's what he wanted to say: "I am very excited to be visiting you in Yugoslavia." Here's what he ended up writing: "I am very sexually aroused to be visiting you in Yugoslavia."

He didn't know the word for "excited" So he looked it up in his English-to-Serbo-Croatian dictionary. There were three choices. He picked one, not knowing that it had sexual connotations. Everybody had a good laugh over it and that was that.

But if you don't know, you can easily make a similar mistake and if you tell someone that you are sexually excited at the thought of being admitted to the University of Michigan you might get a rejection letter and a phone call from Ann Arbor law enforcement officials.

I can't stress it enough. If you are not a native English speaker, then get someone who is to review your essays and have them suggest corrections to any errors they find.

Addendum 1:

Have an answer when asked why you want to get an MBA

This could have been put under Commandment I, but it's important enough that merits attention and space to itself.

Every school is going to ask you why you want an MBA and some will ask why you want an MBA specifically from their programs. I have never seen a school not ask this question. You absolutely need to have an answer to this question. If you are not sure what your long range plans are or you don't know what you want to get into after earning an MBA, then make something up. Sound convincing if you can.

I know I told you not to lie, and you shouldn't, but this is one place where "I'm not sure," or "I have a few ideas of what I might want to do" is not going to cut it. You need to come across as focused when answering this question. I can't stress that enough, so I am going to say it again: You need to come across as focused when answering this question.

If you have an idea of some things you might like to get into, pick one and talk about it like you are very passionate about it. You're not lying in that case, you just might not be telling the entire truth; or just convince yourself, if temporarily, that it's what you really want to do in life. To paraphrase George Costanza: It's not a lie if you believe it.

Ideally your plans will have both short- and long-term components. For example—and admissions people see something like this a lot—"I want to work for McKinsey in Houston in their energy division so that I can acquire the industry-specific experience I need to then go out and start my own turkey-remnants bio diesel manufacturing facility." The consulting-to-entrepreneur track is a popular short-term to long-term path people lay out in this essay.

The point is to sound like you know exactly why you want an MBA. Schools don't want people who just want to get their ticket stamped.

I can't emphasize this enough. Pick one goal or idea or career trajectory and talk about it with conviction. You can maybe get away with two things—"I want to do x, or I want to do y"—but x and y had better be very similar or closely related enough that it makes sense to them why you would still be undecided at this point.

Now, here's the full disclosure part of this addendum. It's a farce, really. Many if not most people get an MBA because they do want their ticket stamped and they aren't really sure what they want to do next. They know they want to make some kind of jump, whether it's a complete career change or just to a different part of a similar industry. The schools have to be aware of this. So, it's kind of a game between you and the school. Once you get into school, you and your classmates will start telling jokes about what you told the admissions committee your future plans were. Half of the class will still have no idea what they *really* want to do well into their second year.

That doesn't let you off the hook though. Until you are in, you have to play your part in the charade. Have an answer and sound convincing.

Addendum 2: Thoughts on the GMAT

Yes, you read this for help on essay writing, so think of this as getting some free, bonus information. This is what you need to know about the GMAT. My caveat is that what I say below may or may not be gospel truth. It is based on *my* experiences looking at applications, however, I talked with several other people in my class at school who evaluated applicants about this and other application-related issues—in general, we never really talked about specific applicants or applications—and they pretty much had the same approach. So the words here are probably more true than they aren't.

First off, if you haven't taken the GMAT yet, good luck. Really. If you're going to drop the \$150 or whatever ridiculous amount that test is up to, then business school is probably something that you want to do, so good luck.

If you have already taken the test. I hope you got a good score, or at least a "good enough" score for the school you want to attend. If not, consider studying some more and taking it again. Then stop. Do not take the GMAT more than twice.

Again, that's just my advice. Obviously, you can take it as many times as you feel necessary, but there are very few sets of circumstances where a better score on the third or fourth or later attempt helps you very much. Here's why. ETS reports *all* of your GMAT scores and test dates when you submit them, and anyone reading your application will see all three or four or more scores. What they will usually see is that all of the scores are within about 20 or 30 points of each other because the truth is that scores don't really change that much from test to test.

If for some reason that third or fourth score is 50 or 60 points higher than the next highest score, then it just looks like you happened to get an outlier and the lower scores are more indicative of your performance.

Even if you just take the test twice, you're still going to have difficulty doing yourself much good. Again, when people take the test a second time they usually don't see much increase or decrease (and don't forget, you might get a lower score!). It's uncanny but the two scores are almost always within 20 to 30 points of each other.

In other instances you do see substantial jumps. For example, the first test was a 630, then the second was a 720. But in those instances the reader can't help but think that the applicant took a preparation class. Now, there is absolutely nothing wrong with taking such a class, but there is still risk to it. Any time I saw those type of point increases my first thought was, "Is this person really 90 points smarter? Or did the strategies from the class she probably took help her inflate her score?" And while I made a conscious effort not to hold it against applicants—they didn't do anything wrong—it probably didn't help anyone who was a borderline case.

If you want to minimize suspicion, think you might benefit from a prep class, and can afford the expense, then do it before you take the test for the first time.

Of course these are not rules, just observations based on personal experiences reading applications. There are exceptions but generally it's hard to go hunting for a higher score and not come back unscathed. I once looked at an application where someone took the GMAT six times. I can't even imagine how painful that was to sit through that test six times. Even worse, his score went down after each of the first four tests.

If your test score isn't what you wanted, another strategy is to wait. Oddly enough nothing looks unusual about someone who takes the test, gets a mediocre score, waits a year, then takes the test again and gets a substantially better score. Something about the year-long time gap undoes any suspicion. Even better, you can use that year to fill out other weaknesses in your application (my advice: go volunteer and get involved in community service because service is the best place to really distinguish yourself from your peers (as an aside, that is probably the most valuable piece of information in this whole document)).

So when I said above, "Consider studying some more and taking it again," what I meant was, "Consider studying some more and taking it again next year."

Okay, it's not the most uplifting advice, but put the above information aside for a minute because this will make you feel better. The GMAT is way overrated. And by that I mean that a great score is no guarantee you will get in (I should know, I scored in the 98th percentile and still

got shot down by a couple of schools). And a score that is below the average for a given school isn't necessarily going to kill your chances.

Count to one. Do it. Count "One thousand one." That's about how long I spent thinking about your GMAT score as an evaluator. If it was in the ballpark, that's all I cared about; and it takes about one second to figure that out. Again, talking with other students who were reading applications, they said similar things.

All your GMAT does is put you in the discussion. Once you are in the discussion, it's the rest of your application that determines what that discussion is like and if you get in. If you are at or above the average GMAT score for a given school, you are in the discussion. If you are just below the average score you are still almost certainly in the discussion. If you are a little further below, then you better have some pretty cool stuff in the rest of your application to get you in the discussion. If you are well below the average, then maybe you should start looking at other schools.

So now you're wondering: "Okay I took it once and I got a 660, the average for my target school is 680, am I okay?"

Yes.

If you are within about 20 – 30 points of your target school's average, you will be fine. That doesn't mean you are getting in, it just means that you shouldn't worry about your GMAT score because it won't be the reason you don't get in. Anything below about 40 to 50 points and you better have some outstanding grades and solid letters of recommendation. You're not necessarily out, but it's an uphill climb. More of a gap than that, and it's anybody's guess. The odd applicant with a relatively low GMAT score can still sneak in, but it's the exception not the rule.

If you are from an historically underrepresented group, you can disregard almost all of this. Admissions committees go out of their way to find candidates from historically underrepresented groups. I can't tell you how much the numbers change, but don't be dissuaded by your GMAT from applying to the school of your choice. You might even want to bring up the subject with the Dean of Admissions at any school you are applying to.

Final thought:

Don't write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear

Maybe this is the über-commandment.

I recently had breakfast with someone from my class. She was talking about her application and how surprised she was that she got in because she really didn't say the things she thought the admissions committee wanted to hear. It had never really occurred to her that she had gotten in because of that reason not despite it. My experience was similar. Schools where I was a little more irreverent and colorful, I got in. Places where I was more conservative in my essay answers, I got rejected.

As a reader, you can tell when an applicant is saying what he thinks you want to hear. It's obvious and it makes for a really bad application. Moreover, so many people do it, that it's the shortest cut to end up sounding like everyone else when your goal is to stand out. The truth is there are no magic words that admissions people are looking for. Schools want interesting and accomplished people. It's really that simple.

Just be yourself. And the essays are your best opportunity to be "you." Everything else is a) pretty objective and b) out of your hands at this point. Your GMAT score is what it is, and you can't go back in time and change your grades. So just be yourself in your essays and good luck.