MBA ADMISSIONS STRATEGY

FROM PROFILE BUILDING TO ESSAY WRITING

'I would definitely buy this book if I were applying again.'
Rodney Bryant, Macquarie Bank, Australia, formerly of Morgan Stanley, New York

Learn all about MBA admissions techniques and skills from an expert!
MBA Admissions Strategy guides candidates through the four most important aspects of a successful, competitive business school application:

- **Competitive Strategy**
- **Profile Development**
- **Essay Management and**
- **Writing Technique**

This lively and accessible new book takes you step-by-step through the process of producing a successful MBA application, with primary emphasis on the essays.

The book outlines a system for candidates to identify the competitive value of their past and construct an application profile and compelling message from this. The book then deals with the typical essay questions that applicants face and shows candidates how to fit their profile message to each question: how to know what to write, which essay to write it in, and how to write it well. Along with specific templates and solutions for improving expression, the book shows readers how to avoid common essay pitfalls.

An essential must-read for all those considering applying for a MBA.

A.V. Gordon, MBA, is Director of The MBA Admissions Studio (www.mbastudio.net) a specialist admissions coaching and essay editing practice for MBA and executive MBA applicants. He has been the resident expert on MBA admissions essay with The World MBA Tour. He writes and consults in various aspects of business coaching and communication strategy.

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MBA ADMISSIONS STRATEGY GORDON

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FROM PROFILE BUILDING TO ESSAY WRITING

A . V . G O R D O N

- **Turn a good application into a great application**
- **Understand how admissions committees work, and what they want from you**
- **Learn what to say, which essay to say it in, and how to say it well**

Expert advice about how to get into the best MBA and EMBA programmes in Europe and the US

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Glossary

Adcom (admissions committee): The committee that decides, on behalf of the MBA program, whether to accept, reject or waitlist a candidate.

Application message: The message that the applicant conveys to the admissions committee, which encompasses his or her key argument for admission.

Behavioural questions: Essay or interview questions that require deep(er) introspective self-analysis from the candidate (cf. factual questions).

Career arc: The rise and progression of a career, ending on a downward track towards retirement.

CEO: Chief executive officer.

Class balance: The mix of counterbalancing backgrounds, experiences, strengths and weaknesses that the admissions committee strives for in each MBA class intake.

Electives: Optional courses in an MBA that allow a candidate to focus their degree. These are normally offered after the core courses.

Gmat: Graduate Management Admissions Test. Internationally standardized verbal, numeracy and writing assessment, required by most admissions committees.

GPA: Grade Point Average. American term for college and graduate school results. It is scored out of a possible 4.0.

Human interest stories: Anecdotes that concern people.

Inverted pyramid: Journalistic technique of starting with the most important facts at the top of the article.

MBA: Masters of Business Administration.

Message mapping: The act of transferring an applicant's message onto the essay questions set. *See* Application message.

Mission (career) goals: Goals that state what the candidate wants to achieve in his or her life. This is to be compared with functional goals, which state what functional job the candidate wants to do.

Positioning: The act of selecting and defining the position (with reference to the competitive pool of applicants) that best promotes the applicant and his or her distinctiveness.

Profiling: The act of understanding and defining an applicant's personal and professional profile attributes.

Question archetypes: The basic, undisguised form of the standard questions that business schools commonly ask of their applicants.

Rankings: The rank-ordered lists of 'the best' business schools, as produced by various newspapers and magazines.

References: Professional testimonials concerning an applicant, required by the admissions committee.

Signposting: The process of directing the reader's expectations as to what will be forthcoming in an essay.

Thesis statement: The key point made in an essay.

Acknowledgements

No book comes into being without considerable assistance from many outside sources. I would like to thank, particularly, the many clients of the MBA Admissions Studio (www.mbastudio.net) who have enthusiastically adopted and enacted the principles suggested in this book, and corroborated its approach with their many high-level MBA admissions successes. I also owe a huge intellectual and practical debt of gratitude to my wife, Helena, for her commitment to the project and her extensive, expert editorial assistance.

A. V. Gordon

Introduction

Get wise! Admissions is the exam

You can get an MBA a thousand ways, but graduates from the top twenty or so brand-name business schools start higher, progress faster and have more senior and interesting careers. Whatever the degree costs, those coming from the better institutions make back many multiples of the investment in their lifetimes. For choice, it's plain dumb not to aim as high as possible. Of course, everyone else knows this too, which is why admissions at the top level is so competitive.

The pass–fail rule of business schools is simple: nobody fails. Every year, in every program, everyone graduates – other than in a few extreme cases where students have serious adjustment or disciplinary problems (and they are excluded early). Every candidate who is admitted will graduate because they were admitted. In fact, the better the school's reputation, the less grades or exams seem to matter. If you were good enough to get in, you're good enough, period.

But, of course, only a tiny percentage of applicants are admitted to competitive programs. Application failure is the norm. Therefore, the MBA application is, for all practical purposes, the final exam. Admission is the only hurdle between the candidate and a top MBA, and all the fast-track career good fortune it brings.

But anyone can do it

Part of business school culture, one quickly learns, is that the MBA is not an academic degree. Smart people are preferred, of course, but you will repeatedly hear how the most intelligent don't always make the best managers and business leaders. This explains why places are often refused to brilliant academicians and those with 740+ Gmats and offered to candidates with diverse

experience, personality, talent and drive. Admissions committees prefer dynamic, effective people with a track record of real-world success, particularly if they have interesting, worthwhile plans for the future.

This means that anyone (under 35, with respectable undergraduate results and a good professional record) has a realistic chance of getting into the finest business schools – provided they have the strategic and competitive understanding of what in their background is valuable to the admissions committee and the communications ability to make their case powerfully. Getting in is a little bit about pure intelligence and a lot about procedural and organizational smarts. This is to say, the tools and techniques of admissions matter enormously. This book provides a manual of these tools: it is your handbook for the admissions exam.

I hope to show you how to apply successfully to a top MBA program. This book is about making a good application that will get you only so far into an exceptional one that will get you where you want to go. It shows you how to find and polish the attributes in your background and connect them to the exact needs of business school admissions officers, using professional marketing and communications techniques, so that you can make your strongest possible claim to a seat at the highest institutions. The text does not offer a mystery key to the admissions gate. There is no such key. Getting in is simply the result of successfully identifying, maximizing and communicating your value and combining this with knowledge of the admissions system and preferences.

Nor is this book an admissions 'pep talk'. It gets underneath nice-sounding, well-meaning advice like 'focus your essay' or 'play to your strengths' to provide step-by-step methods for *how* to do it, including analytic tools, exercises, pointers and checklists. It is written to be used as a handbook as you research business schools, evaluate your competitive strengths, assemble your profile, develop your essay-message response and write it better than your competitors.

Guide to the guide

This book is divided into four sections: admissions strategy, profile development, essay management and writing techniques.

Section One discusses the players, practices and culture of the MBA admissions process and how to promote yourself in this context. It describes the attributes schools seek in applicants and the many considerations they have in admitting or rejecting applicants. It considers not only how the process works from the point of view of the admissions committee (Adcom), but also who it works for and how the needs of the committee's stakeholder base play out in various stages of the admissions process. Insight is also provided in many practical areas, including researching and choosing schools, understanding

school rankings, timing the application, writing and rewriting the Gmat, strategizing references and preparing for interviews.

Section Two shifts the focus from the admissions process to the candidate's own profile. This section offers personal diagnostic and profiling tools to analyse both personal and professional profile strengths, weaknesses and differences. This is followed by techniques to identify and extract the most important and persuasive parts – the key areas of competitive value – and consolidate them into presentable application themes. It then provides guidelines for developing these themes into a strategic positioning and a compelling message.

The following sections deal with managing the essays: how to know what to say, which essay to say it in and how to say it well. It shows how the profiling work done in Sections One and Two may be carried forward and applied to the essay requirements.

Section Three deals with the problem of understanding the essay questions and fitting a profile and application message to them. The ten MBA question archetypes are revealed, which provides the basis for recognizing each question and therefore understanding what answer information is relevant, what might be additional and what is superfluous. A consolidated approach to mapping an application profile message to the essay questions is provided, along with a worked example.

Section Four is about how to write the essays, from first draft to final revision. It examines the tools and techniques for attracting and retaining readers and promoting message absorption, beginning with targeting the admissions officer with important and relevant information. Solutions for organizing and structuring essays are addressed and templates for organizing specific essays are suggested. Various principles of better writing, including developing stories, using imagery, creating emotive effect and managing tone, are provided. Common essay pitfalls are identified and fixes suggested. The section ends with strategies for a first essay draft and seeing it through the revision process, including tips for improving expression, sentence construction and word choice. An essay revision checklist is provided at the back of the book.

SECTION ONE

Strategy for the Admissions Process

1 Marketing to Adcom

Marketing yourself

MBA admissions turns on the simplest and oldest rule in communications strategy: to win you need to connect your objectives with those of your audience. You need to understand what they need to hear or are ready to hear, and increase the overlap between that and what you have to say. If you are better than the next applicant at demonstrating the common ground between your objectives and the objectives of Adcom (the MBA program's admissions committee), you will be accepted.

Conveying a sense of fit between an item and its target audience is, of course, nothing other than marketing. Your application to business school is a marketing campaign. You have to introduce and sell a product (you) to a consumer/client (the school's admissions committee) under competitive conditions. You have to understand the needs, wants and desires of your clients in detail so you know what they value and why they value it, and how to pitch your product within this value system.

Just as Colgate Palmolive researches your toothpaste preferences, creates a desired product and sells it by telling you how it correlates with your needs, so you too must research your 'buyer' preferences, shape yourself into an attractive and necessary product and coordinate various methods of communication (essays, interviews, references) to get the committee to pick you ahead of the rest. You have to create a coordinated campaign to influence the admissions officer's buying decision, and manage this application campaign as it unrolls over weeks or months.

Getting elected

Another, similar way to look at the process is to think of yourself as campaigning for elected office. You are the politician, the business school admissions

committee members are the voters. Every other applicant is also standing for office. You each have your platform: what you stand for, what you will bring, what you will do if elected and what you have done in the past that proves this intent. You each get opportunities to make your case. Your job is to understand your voters' needs and wants better that the others, and to find, champion and communicate the parts of you that fit with their agenda.

Understanding your admissions task in these terms should turn your application world upside down: it's not just 'about you'. It's about your *fit* with them. Companies don't make products and then try to sell them. They study the market, determine needs and produce accordingly. Politicians are influenced enormously by voter sentiment and are led by the polls. If you know what the admissions committee is looking for and listening for, you can almost always find things in your past and your profile to hit the right notes.

There is an important, immediate caveat. Nothing about this market-driven approach implies that you should try to bend yourself into the mould of what you think the ideal business school applicant is. There is no one MBA applicant success 'type'. In fact, paradoxically, trying to be the stereotypical candidate puts you right outside your buyers' spectrum of desire because they want individual diversity not stereotyped generality.

Therefore, your marketing and electioneering task is to be highly individualized and absolutely true to yourself – but also savvy about which parts of yourself happen to overlap best with the admissions committee's needs and preferences, and therefore add value to them, and be alert to ways of communicating that overlap. Your application task is one of judicious profile selection and framing, not self-compromise.

Seeing the world through Adcom's eyes

To find and exploit the overlap between you and the admissions committee, you need to step into their shoes and understand the world from their point of view: what they are looking for, what persuades them, what's most important about you to them, who they will choose, who they will reject and why. You need to understand what their professional needs, desires, fears and preferences are. You need to know what their organizational situation is, who their stakeholders are and what system of reward and sanction they operate in. If you know some of this, you will be able to think through any admissions application as an admissions officer would, and know why – if you were in their position – you would say 'yes' or 'no' to any particular application, including your own.

There's obviously some variation according to the culture of the school, but the following are the main categories of people processing your file:

- professional admissions staff;
- current MBA students working in the admissions office;
- adjunct application 'readers';
- academic faculty;
- alumni interviewers.

Significant admissions back-office work is done, particularly in the United States, by current second-year, and sometimes even first-year, students. At some schools, students conduct interviews as well. Other schools employ outside readers. The main purpose of these people is to do initial screening and rejection of clear non-starters. They have considerable input in determining the first cut but don't have the final say in who gets an offer of a place.

The admissions committee is often headed by the dean or a member of academic faculty and has rotating faculty representation. For university political reasons, admissions is often set up so academics can – should they choose to – wield influence and have the final say. But be sure that the non-research, non-publishing, non-teaching work of admissions is far from the primary concern of most academics. They have a supervisory concern but little hands-on influence or interest.

'People people'

The real force in the admissions office is the corps of professional admissions officers. These are mostly career human resources professionals, generally with a strong background and prior professional experience in the human and social sciences and training in areas such as human resources management, organizational behaviour, psychology or education. They are in their admissions jobs because they are the kind of people who are interested in:

1. People, their lives, their motivations, their challenges and their choices.
2. Groups and organizations, and how people come together and function to achieve larger goals.
3. Education and skills development, and the advancement of knowledge resources and human capital.

Their professional challenge is to apply their people skills and organizational insight to select the best candidates for admission and to construct a balance of skills and attributes across the class intake. Although statistical processes augment admissions decision making, it is very unlikely that there will be any genuine quantitatively oriented people in the admissions office. As a group they will know almost nothing about engineering, technology or business.

In other words, the professional admissions officer is a *completely different person* to the average MBA applicant. They have different personal and professional interests and they are on a different career track. They do not live life to create positive free cash flows or to take companies public.

The implication of this difference is that if you are to persuade them of your value as a candidate, you need to make the effort to talk *their* language: you need to engage them with lucid, insightful, carefully motivated human resources friendly self-analysis and life-path analysis, complete with a well-developed understanding of your organizational and leadership profile. No matter what the particular business or technical thrust of your application, you need to frame it and yourself adequately in human behaviour terms.

I know of no better example of Adcom's call for the human behavioural side of your candidacy than this guidance to applicants from Stanford's admissions office:

> Our goal is to gain insight into the person behind the resume. We encourage you to share with us your influences, motivations, passions, values, interests, and aspirations. Although there are no 'right answers' here, the most effective essays emphasize the 'who' and 'why' as well as the 'what.' We believe each applicant has a set of unique experiences and perspectives to bring to the Business School community. This is your opportunity to share what you consider to be most important: treat your essays as 'conversations on paper.' Tell us your story, and tell it in a natural and honest way.[1]

The reward system for admissions officers

If you are to understand fully the motivations and choices of your customer, that admissions committee, you must understand the systemic network of responsibilities, rewards and censures that admissions officers are in. As it happens, they are responsible to a broad set of stakeholders: (1) the university, (2) the faculty, (3) the program's alumni, (4) recruiters and (5) current and incoming students (Figure 1.1).

In other words, in choosing between you and the next candidate, they have to be satisfied that you will make the grade:

- *For the other students*: to provide them with the smartest, most talented, most diverse and most experienced class.
- *For recruiters*: to provide them with quality candidates who are valuable and recruitable.
- *For alumni*: to provide them with a continued high-value, high-achiever network in the future.

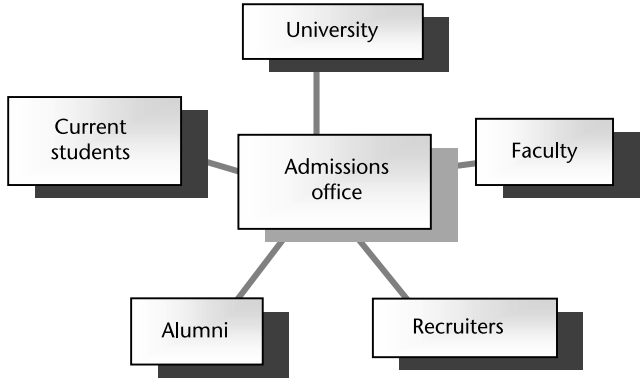

Figure 1.1 The five stakeholder sets an MBA admissions committee has responsibilities to.

- *For the faculty*: to provide them with bright, interesting, challenging students.
- *For the school*: to provide it with another excellent, lifetime ambassador who will reflect well on the institution wherever he or she goes. (Ideally, also someone who makes lots of money and donates handsomely to the school.)

Note that these stakeholders' concerns mature over different time horizons. The needs of fellow students and faculty are immediate. Recruiters' needs are a year or two away, while the interests of the alumni and the university are five or more years off. This explains why the admissions committee examines you both as a short-term asset who can contribute immediately (due to experience, intelligence, team skills, personality, diversity, and so on) and as a long-term asset who will mature into a senior business position in years to come (as suggested by leadership potential, management capabilities, ambition, etc.).

If you understand that the admissions office is answerable to each of these stakeholders, you understand the risk that each offer of a place implies for the admissions officer. In accepting a candidate, they are betting on that candidate fulfilling the needs of the school's various stakeholders better than every one of the rejected applicants.

It is a risk which can and does backfire from time to time – as students bomb out, drop out, cheat, disrupt teams, upset faculty, annoy recruiters, and so on. If you position yourself as the candidate who will help the admissions officers to most comprehensively and reliably serve their various stakeholders, they will be inclined to take a risk on you and make you an offer. If you look like you might embarrass them with regard to all or some of these stakeholders, you will be too high-risk and you will be refused.

They compete too

Don't forget that, while the process is competitive for you, the candidate, it is competitive for them too. For admissions officers to best serve their stakeholder communities, they must compete against other schools to admit a class of the finest candidates. Considering that business school education is not a pre-packaged set of skills that you are going to be 'spoon fed', but rather thousands of learning events, co-created between faculty and students, and between the students themselves, the quality of the students makes a huge difference to the quality of the program.

This forces business schools into competition for the finest applicants. Even for the top programs, getting 'the best' is not a given. Most invest many hundreds of thousands of dollars in expensive marketing to attract quality applicants, and they take the business of screening them very seriously. They process thousands of applications, normally under quite tight deadlines, to separate out the best ones.

The better you are able to help them satisfy the demands of this competitive situation, the more likely you are to move through the system towards admission. Don't expect them to mine your application for its value and get it right. It is up to you to understand what is valuable, and for you to frame yourself broadly in those terms. Chapter 2 elaborates what the admissions committee is looking for.

2 Attributes that count

What satisfies the admissions committee?

The internal culture of business schools differs widely, and they are popularly understood to seek different types of people. You will hear that, 'for Stanford intellectual ability comes first. Northwestern has a greater emphasis on teamwork, Harvard looks for leaders, Insead looks for international people', and so on. This is true. But don't overestimate this stereotyping. School-specific criteria are generally a tiny part of the admissions decision. Mostly programs all apply very similar, common criteria, asking the same kinds of questions, making the same demands and competing for candidates with similarly balanced profiles and demonstrated skills.

These are the attributes that all programs look for:

1. *Intellectual ability*: a candidate who is smart and easily able to handle the demands of the schoolwork and, ultimately, the business world. This is assessed by academic record (GPA or equivalent) and Gmat score, although other postgraduate and non-degree results may be considered. The GPA and Gmat are particularly valuable in that they allow the committee to compare applicants from different backgrounds. Academic results from a previous postgraduate degree may count, but they will count less than your easily compared undergraduate record. The quality of undergraduate institution attended (that is, the competition you beat out to be admitted to college) is also weighed.

2. *Quantitative orientation*: a candidate who can 'do' numbers. Business school does not require any advanced maths but a basic quantitative orientation is important to handle the coursework at a day-to-day level. If you have years of engineering or finance behind you, the committee will ask no more questions. If you are coming from a non-quantitative background, the maths result in your Gmat will be a crucial piece of your application. Any numbers course you have, or can acquire (and get an A in) before applying, will help you. Most

schools run a maths prep module for accepted candidates in the weeks before school starts, but this will not let you off the hook if your quantitative profile is weak.

3. *Analytical mindset*: a candidate who is able to think critically and tolerate complex, open-ended problems. This is different from intellectual ability or quantitative ability in the raw: it is the ability to cut through a mass of data and extract the critical variables, to sort and connect relevant ideas and to see patterns and develop optimal solutions from them. Not surprisingly, analytical skills are heavily demanded by the case method and are the basis of solving the case 'exams' that consulting and other firms use for recruitment.

4. *Success record*: a candidate with a proven run of success. It matters less what you succeeded at than that you have achieved in the best company (which suggests likely future success in whatever you choose to do). Faced with equivalently good candidates, admissions officers put their faith in the old maxim 'success breeds success'. This is why top schools routinely select Olympic athletes, air force pilots and prominent young achievers in the arts and sciences. Your claim to success will be more compelling if it can be verified by awards, trophies, job promotions, and so on. The quality of the challenge also counts: making associate at McKinsey means more than making associate at the local consulting shop.

5. *Maturity and professionalism*: a candidate who looks, talks and acts like a grown-up. Through your essays and interview the committee will get a good sense of whether you have the personal maturity and professional polish necessary to succeed at school, in recruiting and in life. Are you poised under pressure? Are you diplomatic under fire? Do you have 'senior presence', or do you come across as a brash kid? Immaturity will be signalled by giveaways such as whining about past failure, recriminating about circumstances beyond your control, blaming others for your bad calls, showing an inability to see your own weaknesses and poor self-restraint, particularly when dealing with others.

6. *Leadership*: a candidate who has created value by being at the helm in group-based activities and is comfortable in this role. Leaders are able to operate both independently and collaboratively as necessary. Their actions demonstrate evidence of insight into people and situations and significant self-knowledge. Beware, management and leadership are often confused, because very often the two functions are present in the same person and the same job. Management refers to the processes of direction and coordination that senior jobs require. Leadership is something else: it is the unquantifiable mix of stature, assurance and charisma that evokes greatness and gets the best out of others. It is the mysterious mix of factors that makes up the person that other people will 'naturally' follow, and who will 'make the difference' between a company's success and failure.

7. *Ambition and motivation*: a candidate who is aiming for big things and planning to play in the senior leagues. It matters less exactly what you plan to do than that you plan to do something grand (but specific), and that you have the will and the focus to achieve it. The MBA career path is not for wallflowers and the faint-of-heart. It is for those who will search out and seize opportunities and challenges. The committee seeks people with big career dreams and deep resources of motivation and self-reliance to achieve them.

8. *Career potential*: a candidate who has what it takes to go to the top. Ambition is a prerequisite, but the committee will also ask itself whether you have 'the right stuff' to actualize your ambition and your potential. Wanting it is one thing, the ability to get it is another. They will look at how you have strategized and built your career so far, and the validity and wisdom of the career goals you desire for yourself. The committee wants to have picked the person who's not just a dreamer, but who is going to make a big impression in the world; whose picture is one day going to be on the cover of *Fortune* magazine.

9. *Perseverance and mental toughness*: a candidate with evidence of the gritty staying power and self-reliance needed to overcome adversity. Successful managers and leaders are the people who come to the front when times are tough, profits are down and obstacles are seemingly insurmountable. They have the drive to keep going when others fall, take whatever tough decisions are necessary and bring their companies out ahead no matter what the obstacles. The committee will respond well to evidence of single-minded determination and tenacity in your approach.

10. *A strong, extrovert personality*: a candidate who likes people and who is professionally (if not naturally) gregarious. Being thoughtful and shy isn't a crime, but management often rises or falls on the power of personality: the ability of key people to motivate, to exhort, to mentor, to be visible and vibrant and passionate. The admissions committee will be on the lookout for optimism and enthusiasm and an engaging, 'can-do' approach. This doesn't mean being a loudmouth, but it does mean having high social self-confidence and strong interpersonal skills.

11. *Active orientation*: a candidate with a bias to action and getting things done. There's nothing wrong with being an observer, thinker and planner, but there soon comes a time in the life of a successful company when it is necessary to act. The committee looks for people who can make that transition; who know when to measure a risk and when to take the plunge for better or worse. They are looking for people who, after demonstrating the skills of analysis, have the stomach to seize the opportunity boldly and back themselves to win.

12. *The killer instinct*: a candidate who is not afraid of winning and seeing

others lose. No matter what they tell you, all business schools are competitive places, as is the business world out there. Adcom must select those most ready for competitive situations and competitive careers, who have an affinity for the cut-and-thrust realities of making money and who thrive in high-pressure environments and head-to-head situations. They will be sifting out those excellent people who are temperamentally better suited to careers in inventing, teaching, caring or designing.

13. *Personal integrity*: a candidate with good interpersonal values and morals. This is back in fashion, since energy companies, auditing firms and Wall Street brokerages have been among the many that have shamed themselves with out-and-out thievery in the last decade. The admissions office knows that if you go to a top school, very soon you will be in charge of a lot of people, a lot of money and many powerful technologies. They will want to know how highly you care about people other than yourself and your immediate circle. Nobody expects you to enter the priesthood, but they want you to play clean with others. They like to think they are choosing people who will do the right thing – even when nobody is looking.

14. *Community orientation*: a candidate who demonstrates responsibility to community, society and the environment, and who has an integrated, sustainable view of the role of companies in the world. Adcom particularly wants to see evidence of your involvement in your own community, however you choose to define that, and some active (non-financial) contribution to social welfare, suggesting your good intentions. Again, you don't have to be a do-gooder, but a lack of clear willingness to 'give back' to the institutions and resources that sustain you will be missed.

15. *Team player*: a candidate who works well with others and who operates smoothly and constructively in collaborative situations. From day one at business school and throughout your business career, you will work on projects that require group-based productivity. Team skills are easy to claim – who, after all, will say they are *not* a good team player? (And we all know many who are not.) So, rather than a self-congratulatory assertion of your faith in teamwork, the committee is looking for evidence of sophistication in your understanding of the dynamics of the groups you have been in, and your own role in them.

16. *Diversity contribution*: a candidate who brings interesting attributes, experiences and depth of background to the group. Diversity can come in standard ways, such as race, gender and foreign country of origin, or it can be more subtle – a unique experience, a particular skill, a reason to see the world differently in some way. Diversity is, of course, not the value in and of itself. It is a proxy for the ability to contribute life experience and extracurricular knowledge to the peer-to-peer business school learning experience. The question

Adcom asks is: What additional/unique perspective or expertise does this candidate bring that will be valuable to others?

17. *Intercultural experience and tolerance*: a candidate who has demonstrated a tolerance for diversity in people and cultures. This is not the same as being 'diverse' – this is openness to the diversity in others. The question is whether and how you have demonstrated an ability to get along with people who are not like you in looks, diction, gender, dress, culture, language, sexual orientation or any other axis of difference. The committee will regard your ability to mix comfortably with all sorts, and one day to hire and promote without prejudice, as key to being a successful manager and leader.

18. *Creativity and innovation*: a candidate who is comfortable with change and ready to use it creatively. As technology moves us forward, and societies and markets change, the skills of savvy adaptation are an ever more fundamental part of management. Chances are, before long, you the MBA graduate will be asked to take part or all of a company in a direction for which there is no road map. Innovative management will be required. An open disposition to change, a demonstrated ability to initiate new ideas and to develop original solutions, and any past activity in the creative arts or sciences, will be an asset to your application.

19. *Communication ability*: a candidate who can write, speak and organize ideas well. Financial and technical skills are important, but the single key skill in senior management is communication: the ability to frame, transmit and negotiate ideas in meetings with clients, staff, investors, regulators, lawyers, industry partners and other stakeholders. Note that, generally in business organizations, the quantitative thinking is done by those near entry level, while the top management and board level spend most of their time talking. Your communication abilities are assessed in your verbal Gmat and analytical writing assessment (AWA) scores, as well as in your essays and interview.

20. *All-rounder*: a candidate who is more than a suit, and who has an array of interests and passions in other things. 'Balance' is the word the committee will use: Does this person do significant things other than work? What moves him? What's her passion? It sounds dated to talk about your 'hobbies', but you must be able to show reasonable time commitment to non-work activities, excluding TV and your 'significant other'. These are the things that will develop the committee's interest in you. Business schools don't need any more one-dimensional, workaholic millionaires-in-training.

21. *Recruitability*: when you are offered a place in an MBA program you step on a treadmill. That treadmill will take you through courses, projects and exams and then back out into the professional world via the job search process. Adcom is concerned that you will move on easily and seamlessly – that

you will be a desirable professional prospect once you have their degree added to your previous skills and experience. If your profile (including the MBA) looks like it would be unattractive to the type of MBA recruiters that come to that campus, it is less likely that you will be admitted.

22. *Likeability*: a candidate who people enjoy having around. All else being equal, people always choose people they *like* as colleagues and co-workers. If you are the otherwise perfect candidate, but sound like you are arrogant, or emotionally unavailable, or an egotist, or antisocial, or ready to trample everyone else with a win-at-all-cost attitude, your application will stall. Business school is an intense sixteen-hour-a-day kind of place. The committee prefers people who are easy to live with and who will be easy for the other students, faculty and recruiters to live with. It's just human nature that it will be harder for Adcom to turn down someone they like (so far, on paper). Don't underestimate this one.

Summary: a CEO in waiting

Matching you to each of these attributes is a way for the admissions committee to ask the one basic question they need an answer to: what is the likelihood you will succeed on campus (inside and outside the classroom), in recruiting and in your career, such that you will satisfy the multiple stakeholders they are responsible to? Are you are a successful person who is likely to continue to be so for all concerned?

It is also no accident that the above twenty-two attributes, taken together, are the qualities of a successful chief executive officer (CEO). The more you have of these attributes, the more you will seem like a CEO-in-waiting, which never hurts. Generally, whatever you plan to do in your career, you should strive to create the impression that you are also chief-executive-to-be. Even if your goal is to be a technical analyst or leveraged buyout wizard, you must still create the impression of wanting to be the senior player in the firm.

This all points to a fundamental insight in application strategy: to create the right kind of impression, you should apply *the way a chief executive would*. Imagine that, for some reason, a CEO had to apply to business school. How would he do it? What would be her essay strategy? How would he approach the interviews? How would she manage her referees? If you can imagine yourself into that position you will generate the kind of 'senior presence' that sets your application apart.

Having said this, be aware that nobody has all of the attributes. It is unrealistic (and therefore a mistake) to try to have them all. You do not have to be perfect to get into a top business school, just as you don't have to be perfect to be successful in the business world. Don't get too bent out of shape by any one weakness or omission in your profile. As long as the general picture

is good and you can show a few areas of remarkable strength, it is okay to have blemishes – as is clearly the case with most successful chief executives.

It's your future not your past that counts

Note that, while the key attributes look to your past for evidence, they are all fundamentally questions about your future. Getting into business school is not a reward for past achievement. You do not get admitted because you were a successful youngster who got A's and won awards, and because you *were* a superstar. You will be admitted because your future looks bright, and you will likely be a superstar soon, and that will reflect well on the school and all concerned. In this sense, getting in is a benefit advanced to you on the expectation of future achievement. A successful past obviously helps make your case for this. Part of your job in your essays is to make a compelling link between your past and future success.

The four attribute dimensions

An alternative way to grasp what schools are looking for is to understand that each of the twenty-two key attributes named above can be viewed as part of one of four attribute sets: academic, professional, interpersonal and personal.

Academic

All things being equal, admissions committees will offer places to candidates with higher undergraduate GPA and Gmats. Not only is this strategy obviously safety-first, but schools are also ranked in part by average Gmat of accepted candidates; therefore, there is pressure to take those with higher scores. Generally, you need a GPA in the high 3s and a Gmat in the high 600s – and not obviously low in either maths or verbal – to be considered at the better institutions. On the other hand, schools generally have quite a broad range for the Gmat and do not stipulate their minimums. They leave themselves some wiggle-room to take a candidate with shaky scores who is otherwise exceptional. (For more on the Gmat, see pp. 27–28.)

Professional

This set incorporates attributes that relate to work profile, professional skills and experience, and career potential. The committee wants candidates who have demonstrated early professional mettle and who therefore have the most to contribute to classroom peer-to-peer learning. Any high-level experience,

specialist technical or methodological skills, or experience in unusual industries is a bonus, particularly if you can explain exactly why this skill or experience is relevant to the learning of other students. For example, a 'veteran' of high-level procurement negotiations could persuasively suggest that experience with her company's negotiation pre-planning methodology will add special value in the Negotiation Strategy Elective.

As they evaluate your professional trajectory, Adcom considers your success history, your stated career goals and your anticipated trajectory. They match this against the potential they and others (your referees and interviewers) see in you. Even though they know your career aspiration will change while you are at school, they prefer those who have clear and ambitious goals and huge reservoirs of motivation to achieve them. They don't look for particular goals as much as the impression that you are the type who sets goals and reaches them.

Interpersonal

This attribute set tells the committee about you in relation to others: as a member of groups, teams, communities and society at large. Adcom knows that whatever you choose to do and whatever industry you are in, a huge slice of your time will be spent in teams, on committees and in groups of all kinds. Therefore, your profile as a social and communal person and your ability to add value to teams is critical. They want to know how you interact with others, how you collaborate and how productively you manage intercultural situations.

Proof of your interpersonal skills may be clear from your record at work, or in extramural or community service projects. On a broader scale, the committee looks for some evidence of your positive relationship with society at large. They don't mind what it is you choose to do, but the fact of doing it is telling evidence of your commitment and broader cooperative value set. They also like you to take an active service role in the community because it tells them good things about your interpersonal proficiency and leadership intent.

Personal

This set of attributes covers who you are as a person, your values, beliefs and motivations. The committee is interested in what kind of family background you come from and the other significant features in your personal and social background – national, ethnic, religious, immigrant origin, minority, and so on – which have created you and continue to shape you. Adcom wants to get behind your record to better understand your perspectives and insights. They want to know what's important to you personally and why. They want to know what personal choices you make in pressure situations. Values and ethics questions always touch on personal beliefs.

In the personal dimension there is no right and wrong. Any background is fine, as long as it is dynamic and shows a reasonable standard of personal integrity. Any personal free-time pursuit is also fine, as long as you are active in it (not watching someone else, for example sports stars, be active). The only way to chill your reader is to be so bland as to have no obvious non-work pursuits.

A four-part interlocking profile

These four dimensions of attributes – academic, professional, interpersonal and personal – interlock to form a balanced competitive profile, as Figure 2.1 shows. Key to a good application and good essays is being able to claim enough

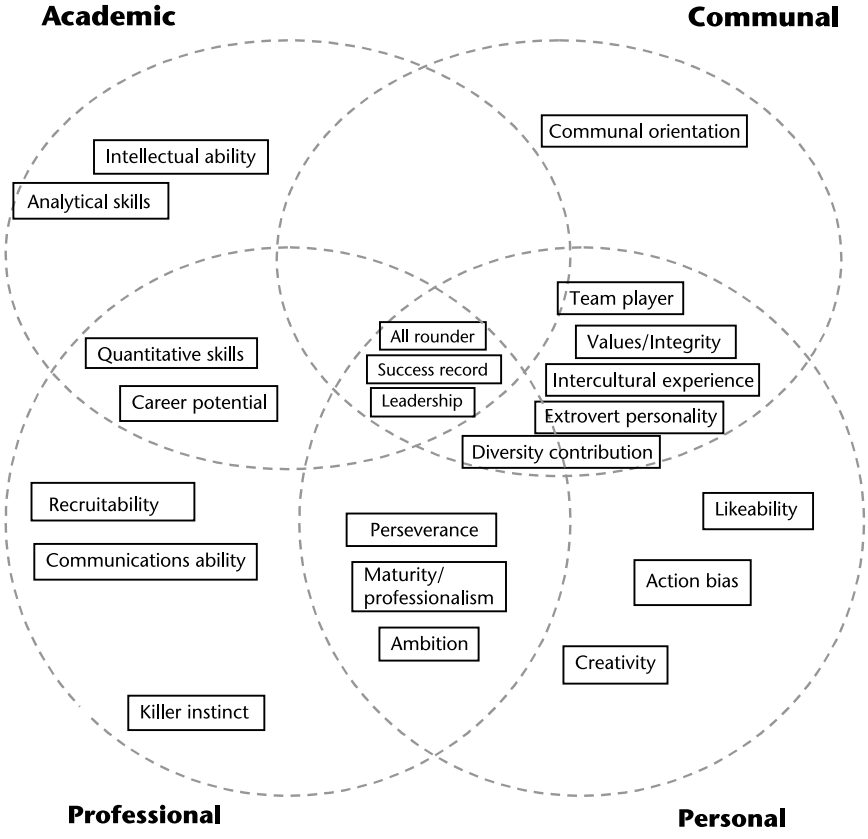

Figure 2.1 Attributes and dimensions map.

Note: The sets that represent the four attribute dimensions – academic, communal, professional and personal – overlap because many of the attributes play a role in more than one of the dimensions.

of the twenty-two key attributes, spread across *all four* dimensions, in your application. This is what will give your profile the necessary balance.

Class balance

At the same time as looking at each candidate individually and choosing the best, the committee is required to balance the class as a whole, in terms of professional backgrounds, cultures, nationalities, ages, interests, skills and career aspirations – in order to maximize the richness of peer-to-peer learning. So, they want everything from oil engineers to dance choreographers, with no one profile type overrepresented.

This has an important corollary: you are not up against everyone for admission – you are up against the people whose profile is similar to yours. No matter who you are, or how well you present yourself, you will be competing for admission both in the overall pool and in your own small circle.

For the purposes of class balance, Adcom will reduce your profile to a few key factors. You might be the Chinese Ministry of Defence woman, or the 23-year-old Chicago agribusiness futures trader, or the Booz Allen Hamilton tax consultant, or the Washington DC radio journalist.

While you are assessed first in terms of the attributes and dimensions described in the previous section, once you pass this test you are then considered against the others with similar profile elements: the Chinese woman might be in a sub-competition with all the other Chinese candidates or other military types. The trader will be compared with the other traders and all the younger candidates. The Booz Allen consultant will be compared with the other applicants from Booz Allen and all the applicants with a tax consulting background. The radio journalist will be compared with media professionals and all the candidates with non-business backgrounds (the 'poets').

To achieve class diversity, schools limit the number of candidates in the oversubscribed categories. This won't be done officially, of course. It is highly unlikely that there will be official quotas for any background or skill, but you can be perfectly certain that the admissions committee will keep tabs on how many offers have gone out to people with more common profiles, and such offers will be more competitive and dry up sooner in the admissions cycle. The most common professional profiles are usually banking, consulting, information technology and engineering. Competitive nationalities are usually Indian, Chinese and American. There are, on average, twice as many male as female applicants (three times as many in Europe), so getting in is, on average, harder for men.

Highlighting diversity contribution

Given this state of affairs, your strategy is to define yourself, as far as possible, into categories that are less competitive. Any atypical parts of your personal or professional background will allow you to do this. But even if you are a New York banker you can still play up the parts of you that suggest some uniqueness to keep yourself out of the most competitive categories.

A two-way fit

When a school has more good candidates than places, the admissions committee will not just be choosing the best candidates and the best class balance. They will also have the luxury of selecting those whose profile, contribution and aspirations match – in the short term and in the long term – the educational offerings and culture of their business school. The questions the committee will be asking are not just whether this candidate is impressive and interesting. They will include: Does he fit with us? How does she add value to our community? Will her style of work mesh with our school and its way of doing things? Will he interact well with the kinds of people we have here and the kind of programs we offer? Will he be recruitable by the kinds of firms that come to this campus? In short, how well do we fit?

This means that you have to provide a specific argument not just as to why you are a good candidate for any program, but why you are the right candidate for the particular program. They want you to show the overlap between your goals and the school's distinguishing attributes, and explain why they, rather than anywhere else, are exactly the institution to help you meet your MBA and post-MBA aspirations.

Understand the school's market positioning

To show this fit you have to understand the school's market positioning. The major business schools each occupy a position in the competitive business education market, with associated brand identity, and they are scrupulous about maintaining it. You will really begin to understand a school when you get underneath all the surface chatter and general promotional claptrap about it and find what really underpins its brand strategy.

For example, Stanford keeps its class tiny and so positions itself as the elite of the elite. To this end they appear to be clinical about picking applicants with the highest Gmats, which, when published, shows them to be the most exclusive. Chicago, with heavy emphasis on classroom tutorial and less time for the case method, positions itself among other things as the most rigorous on taught skills (therefore, allegedly, providing the most 'ready' graduates to

certain kinds of recruiting companies). Insead positions itself as the international Mecca by requiring three languages of every graduate, thereby attracting the most international student set and benefiting from a reinforcing cycle that keeps it the number one international brand. Wharton and Columbia both have direct feeder relationships with Wall Street, which is a strong part of their identity. NYU Stern does too, and it also has a special media-business angle to its brand.

Inevitably, the school's positioning and brand strategy will be reflected in its culture – the intangible mix of place, values, reputation, attitudes and faculty strengths that it projects. In each case, the brand characteristics and reputation serve to distinguish the school and keep its attractiveness to top students, top faculty, Fortune 100 recruiters and major donors focused and sharp.

How to do it

You will *not* be able to gain insight at this level by reading the glossy brochures, because schools obviously all claim to be strong all-round. You will be better able to glean it in such things as the press releases quoting the dean on new initiatives for the program, or by seeing what type and level of faculty are being hired (and which types are moving on), or what conferences are being held on campus, or co-sponsored by the university and certain (which?) types of business, and so on. Understanding what a school is really about requires a bit of scepticism and some hard-nosed investigation to get behind the institutional spin to what is really going on.

As you begin to understand what exactly the school stands for and what it is aspiring to stand for, and therefore what drives Adcom's choices at this deeper level, it will be clearer to you how choosing you or not fits with the school's broader aspirations, and you will be in a better position to understand what about you might be a more or less valuable contribution. This understanding can then find its way into your essays as you position yourself as a reliable vehicle for the continuance of their brand and their culture and the expansion of their 'mission'. Not all accepted students will be perfect prototypes of the school's brand, but most will clearly be a fit with one or other part of it.

Start with your needs

Obviously, you greatly increase your chances if you apply to programs to which your profile and interests are already aligned, and your aspirations fit naturally. It's almost impossible to falsify a fit, so don't bother trying. Not only will the 'false you' be a pale shadow of the real you, and therefore much less likely to get in, but even if you do get in you will only succeed in putting yourself at an institution where you are unhappy for two years.

Instead, start with yourself. Carefully analyse your own motivations, needs, desires and preferences for getting an MBA, and work out clearly what you want from the school you go to. Then search for the right place. You are paying the fees: it is your graduate education and your life. If you don't define your needs and preferences at the start, you will soon be blown off course by what the schools want you to look like and what they want you to aspire to.

Section Two of this book delves further into profile analysis and developing your competitive positioning in order to prepare your essays. What you do here will be a preliminary to that.

Take a sheet of paper and write short answers to the following questions:

- Why do you want to go to business school? Why do you need an MBA?
- What are you hoping to learn? What general things and what specialized things?
- What sort of learning environment and culture are you looking for?
- What are your career goals?
- What are your personal goals?
- What skill or background do you have that is unique, that will make you attractive?

These are just starter questions to get you thinking. Add your own. You may also consider duration, location, cost and any other factors that shape your preferences. When you have finished brainstorming, spend some time getting your answers to the questions into a few key points. You should be able to write a mission-statement sentence that goes something along the lines of:

- I'm applying to do an MBA because . . .
- The kind of program I want to go to is . . .
- Given my particular goals, I need an MBA program that does . . .

This sheet of paper is your anchor in the application storm. Paste it above your desk. Refer to it when you feel you are being run ragged by the demands and preferences of the schools.

3 Strategy fundamentals

Researching and choosing programs

After you decide what you want, you can set about finding the institutions where you will get it. This requires detailed, hands-on research about each prospective school and its particular culture, curriculum emphasis and extramural activities. In cases where the research takes you towards a fit, this will become the basis of the argument of fit you will make in your application essays.

When researching business schools, the most important parameters of choice are as follows:

1. Location

Place strongly affects the kind of students you are with, the companies recruiting for internships and jobs on campus, the nature of extramural learning opportunities, and so on. You will have more chance of making your big start in media-entertainment management coming out of UCLA than out of Michigan. Your career in Europe will be launched better from LBS than from Kellogg. Location also influences your cost of living and may make a difference to fees.

Generally, US city schools will have student populations that are more diverse and more international. The same will be true of the faculty. At the main European schools, the student body will be genuinely multilingual and multinational, as will the faculty. Almost anywhere in the world the curriculum will be significantly oriented to American business issues (most of the cases are written by US professors and published by US schools, particularly Harvard), but in the US the American orientation will obviously be more pronounced.

American schools will have more women in the program (about 35–40%) than foreign schools do (about 20–25%). This is even more so in the major urban centres of the US. Certain schools take older students (in their thirties)

more readily than others. Although none publicly commit to this either way, students at European schools are, on average, a few years older.

2. Profile of participants

Most people will tell you that the make-or-break of your experience at business school will be the people you meet and the friends you make. If you make the effort to understand the subtle differences in the type of person each school attracts – their age, gender, educational background, industry orientation, international exposure, amount and type of prior work experience, and so on – and you go somewhere where you will more easily fit in, you will be a lot happier. Student profile is affected primarily by a school's culture, history, reputation, location, educational method and faculty specialization.

3. Recruitment opportunities

A school's location, reputation and specializations are among the factors that affect which companies recruit there. Every school publishes a list of companies that come to campus and how many graduates they hire, together with placement rates and average starting salaries. This will give you a good picture of both the prestige the school's recruits are held in and the 'quality' of companies recruiting them. Generally, the candidates of top-branded schools have a much wider recruitment basin – around the US and around the world. Smaller or less well-known schools usually have strong links with the companies in their local region.

Note that the average starting salary is a *much* better guide to a program's real prestige than any magazine rankings (see section on rankings below). However, when considering starting salaries between schools, make sure to compare the same year, as MBA starting salaries look quite different in booms and busts. Also bear in mind that the monetary value of salaries outside the US is generally lower, but non-US jobs often include better vacation and other benefits of a saner work–life balance.

4. Length, structure and flexibility of the program

The time it takes to get an MBA can vary from ten months to two years (and more for a part-time program). This affects both the cost and how long you will be out of the workforce. Longer programs offer more electives, exchange programs and other forms of enrichment, including the opportunity to do a full summer internship. Shorter programs cut the opportunity cost – and the waffle some say – to a minimum. Some programs only allow you into their accelerated program if you have advanced candidacy in business or a specialist technology. Generally, shorter programs are better for:

- older, more experienced candidates;
- candidates with a prior masters degree;
- candidates planning to return to a familiar industry (moving from a technical to a management function).

Executive MBAs are done by older candidates with ten or more years of work experience. Typically, students in these programs have been sponsored by their employers, although this trend is on the wane. Executive MBAs are seen to be easier to get into – therefore, the prestige factor of having got in is lower and the relative career boost is, on average, also lower. In economic downturns, more students use the part-time options of one form or another because they are less inclined to give up their jobs.

5. Electives and options

Mostly, the core curriculum is identical everywhere and, from a strictly educational point of view, it doesn't matter too much where you do it. Electives, however, differ significantly from school to school, according to faculty interest and expertise. Also, faculty with common expertise tends to congregate together. In this way, schools become known for one or a number of specialties. For example, Wharton is considered to be the place for specialist finance and real-estate concentrations, Stern for media management, MIT for technology management, and so on.

In addition to classes, programs often provide experiential learning opportunities, exchange opportunities, internships and consulting projects with industry partners, as well as regional, national or international tours. Programs also offer different and numerous opportunities to join and run clubs and societies and to organize conferences. Judicious selection of these opportunities will help you focus your program to your goals and create a decent track record in your chosen field by the time recruiters come to campus.

Many schools offer joint degrees with other schools: law, international relations, urban planning, and so on. Joint degrees will take longer but will give your MBA a very clear industry focus. This tends to be more important if your career path has not been narrowly defined before your MBA, or if you are too young to have had much career definition.

6. Reputation and ranking

The reputation of a school is one of the most important variables to consider, not least because the prestige of the school and hence its ability to be selective – and therefore your achievement in having got in – will almost certainly be the most important legacy of your business education. Bear in mind that schools will likely have a general reputation and a reputation for certain

specialties. Sometimes the specialty reputation is more important than the general one (for example, going to the Johnson School, Cornell, may be a better place than Stanford if you intend to launch a career in hotel management).

Reputation is *not* the same as the popular annual 'rankings' published by business periodicals. The rankings are a guide – very often flawed – to reputation, and no more. An enormous amount of genuine research and data processing goes into the rankings each year, but the problem with the rankings is that they are not primarily there to help you, the candidate. They are there to sell more copies of the publications that publish them and the advertising that goes with it. This can lead to a potential conflict of interest; for example, a repeat of the same number-one school every year is bad for magazine sales. That's why the rankers have to suddenly 'find' that schools 'climb rapidly' or 'drop unexpectedly', or whatever it takes to sell magazines. Do not be concerned that your dream school has suddenly dropped three places. Next year it will be back up, amid magazine headline hoopla.

In reality, the reputation that a school has in the marketplace and among recruiters and headhunters is consistent year in and year out and changes at a glacial pace, if at all. Here's the news. The top schools (in alphabetical order) are: Chicago, Columbia, Dartmouth, Fuqua, Harvard, Insead, Kellogg, LBS, Michigan, Sloan, Stanford, Stern and Wharton – with Haas, Johnson, Tuck, Darden, IMD and IESE also there or thereabouts. Nothing will have changed by the time you read this or in five years from now.

Therefore, forget ranking turbulence that will not alter your career prospects in any way and concern yourself with the overall long-term reputation of the school, the kind of faculty it attracts and the recruitment company it keeps. The real question to ask is: Which band is the school in – is it consistently a top-ten or top-twenty ranked program, or not? Schools tend to move between the bands very slowly or not at all.

Whether you go by reputation or rankings, remember that they rate various different qualities of a program that may not be the qualities that are important to you. Reputation will never measure how well a school meets your specific goals. It will be more rewarding to go somewhere where you have some intrinsic congruence with the culture of the school, faculty and fellow students, and where your profile and aspirations fit the curriculum and the alumni network. Certainly consider the schools with better reputations, but pick the right school *for you*.

If possible, try not to have your heart set on any one program. Even if your dad went to Harvard, and you've been expected to go there since you were three years old, remember that all business schools in the same tier will, ultimately, give you an equivalent professional boost. And, even if you are an ace applicant, and your chances of getting into a top school are strong overall, the odds on you getting into any one specific school are never strong. There's just too much competition out there.

Dig behind the websites and glossy brochures

For better or worse, there is now a lot of information about MBA institutions on the Internet – everything from the schools' self-promotion brochures to thousands of other websites, books and articles, and personal impressions (including personal MBA 'blog' journals). Beware, quality is mixed to say the least. You will get many perspectives from parties with vested interests that are not aligned with yours. Use them wisely. However, the main problem with popularly accessible information about a school is not that it is wrong; it is that, by the time you get it, it will be dumbed-down, generalized and so well-known as to be effectively useless. You want fresh, specific, accurate, detailed information that is relevant to your situation and your goals. The information will be good specifically if it is not known by everyone, so that when you use it in your essays it looks like you have really done independent homework on the school in question.

The best quality sources of information on any program are current students and recent alumni. They will know the way a school operates, what's important, what areas of study are currently 'hot' and generally how the culture really manifests itself. They will have learned how the system works and how to work it. That's the stuff you need to hear. Generally, schools are quite happy to put you in touch with students.

A tip: if you have trouble getting to students, approach them under the banner of a common interest. If you are a rugby player, call the head of the rugby club; if you are a stock market buff, call the secretary of the equities club; if you are a Spaniard, call the European club, and so on. Within minutes you can move the conversation to your more general school-research questions.

Visiting the campus

Should you plan to visit the schools that are within a reasonable distance? Generally, yes. You will get a more rounded picture of the institution and its culture and may get specific things to talk about in your essay. But it is not worth doing if you just sniff the air and pick up the glossy literature. Your campus visit will make a difference if you engage the staff and current students in conversation and ask leading questions. Go to the cafeteria and hang out with people, and come away with a picture of your target institution that contains some unique impressions and is specifically oriented to your interests and goals, so it is clear in your essays that you did some real homework rather that just pulling stuff off the Web.

Don't put too much store in the meeting you may have with the admissions staffer. When your application file comes up, she will not recall your visit from among thousands of others. Also, the fact of having visited the campus will *never* formally benefit you in admissions: Adcom is careful to be fair to

applicants in other states and around the world who cannot visit. What's important is that when your application arrives, and is read, it shows you are enthusiastic enough about the program to be fully and intelligently informed about it.

How many schools?

There's some simple economics in deciding how many applications to make – the more you do, the more you spread your risk of missing out entirely, but the thinner you spread your time and attention and the patience of referees who have to write you a separate recommendation for each application. Obviously, you and your referees can recycle a lot of information, so it gets easier each time, but you can't short-cut the research phase.

Even if you are an excellent candidate, it is impossible to be sure you will get into any one institution. Apply to a minimum of three. For most people the limit is about six, but if you feel you can go on, great. Apply to at least one 'reach' (dream) school. On the flip side, also apply to a 'safety' school – somewhere less competitive where you have an outstanding chance of getting in if all else fails.

Gmat strategy

Schools generally don't publish the minimum Gmat score they accept because the minimum is a guideline not a rule. They don't want candidates with an otherwise excellent application failing themselves where, in fact, they might have had an excellent chance. Admissions officers know that academic scores are just part of the picture, and often a misleading part.

Traditionally, 670 has been the guideline minimum for top schools, and about 600 for second-tier good schools. As Gmat score inflation rises, these figures are on the upward march. Anecdotally, it appears that 690 is becoming the new 'low bar' for a top-ten program.

However, there is more malleability in the system than most candidates realize. If the rest of your application is good and your undergraduate record is in the right range, you can be up to 40 or 50 points below the school's Gmat average of accepted candidates (providing you are not too lopsidedly low in the maths or verbal). Obviously, the program's published average tells you that about half of the scores are below that mark. The AWA score is less important, but doing conspicuously well in it might push a weaker Gmat over the bar, while doing badly may flag an English disability.

If you are too far below the school's average Gmat, nothing else you are, do or say will count. After you achieve the threshold – once it is clear that you are brainy and numerate enough – the admissions committee will start looking

for other attributes, so the value of even higher scores has rapidly diminishing returns. A 750 Gmat is great, but it's not going to help you if your references are so-so and your interview is poor. A 690 with great essays will beat a 720 with poor essays. Adcom prefers 'balanced good' to 'unbalanced excellent'.

Therefore, it makes sense to be concerned with your Gmat until it is within the guidelines for your target program, and then forget about it and spend time on other aspects of your application. Only consider rewriting it if your score is clearly way below the school's average or if your verbal and quantitative results are seriously unbalanced – more than 20 percentage points apart – particularly if it is the quantitative that is low.

Bear in mind also that all your Gmat scores appear on the report ETS sends to the school. Generally, schools ignore previous lower scores, but it starts to look dodgy if you take the test more than twice. If you find yourself in this situation, you may also be able to offset a low Gmat (or GPA) by taking supplementary college-level courses and doing well in them. Good grades in courses in accountancy, statistics and microeconomics will demonstrate a willingness and ability to manage quantitative requirements that is far more impressive to the committee than a marginal rise in Gmat score.

For Gmat and GPA guidance for international candidates, see below.

Managing references and referees

Selecting and briefing recommenders is an important piece of your strategy. Once again, put yourself in the shoes of the committee and ask: What are they looking for? What questions do they really need answered that only the interview can answer? What information can they not get any other way? What they need from the reference, specifically, is to know that there are serious, ranking people in the business world ready to go on the record and vouch for you. Getting this second and third opinion from the business world spreads the risk and helps safeguard the committee against accepting the wrong candidates.

Just as Adcom relies almost exclusively on the GPA and Gmat to judge you academically, they rely on your referees to judge your professional performance and potential. In fact, they have almost no other way to judge you professionally other than via referees. Therefore, while it is nice if your reference is about values and character issues, the essential point of the reference for Adcom is the referee's judgement of you at work.

Who to pick

Given the clear professional demand on your references, it is obvious that they should come primarily if not exclusively from the workplace. The ideal referee

is someone at your company who has supervised your work and knows you well enough to rate your professional qualities and performance. In other words, the referee should be your current work supervisor (if not, the committee will be asking themselves 'why not?') or someone else you report to, or used to report to. Your referee should, obviously, be an enthusiastic supporter of your candidacy.

This is one of the places in the MBA application where if you duck the requirement it will be obvious. If you go to a friend of your parents, or your old swimming coach, or Uncle Bob, it will seriously hurt you. It is not problematic to have all recommenders from the workplace, but it is a grave problem not to have any references from the workplace. (If you are asked for three referees, the *third* one can be the swimming coach or some other soft-touch character testimony.)

Academic referees

It is very tempting, especially if you are relatively fresh out of college (and nobody at your office particularly notices you or really knows you), to go back to your favourite professor-mentor. Don't do it. All it says is that you haven't impressed anyone since college. Also, an MBA does not lead to an academic career, so there is a limit to how effectively an academic referee can judge your potential. You do not need any testimonials to your academic merit beyond your GPA and Gmat score.

Eminent and celebrity referees

Resist the temptation to seek a reference from the most well-known person you know, or the one with the highest sounding title. If you get a reference from the president of Accor, or your father's friend who is on the board of Citibank, the alarm bells will ring and the committee will ask: How well does this person really know you or your work? But if this referee really does interact with you often enough to competently answer the detailed questions on the form, then there is no problem. Bottom line: the committee wants referees who really, personally, know you at work.

Priming referees

It is accepted practice that you give your referee a copy of your essays, résumé and any other relevant information so that they can write something that harmonizes with the thrust of your application. It is not considered acceptable for you to write the recommendation yourself – although many referees will wave you away and tell you they are too busy, and make you do your own first draft.

The ethics are up to you, but if you get the chance to create the draft you can certainly use it to define the terrain you want covered and create congruence between what the referee says about you and what you say about yourself in the essays. It is not important that you write glowing praise about yourself, but it is to your advantage if you can define the topics and scope of the statement.

The other advantage of being active in the first draft is it gives you the opportunity to create detailed, concrete observations and stories in your reference (as you will do in your essays). If your referee writes in lazy generalities and banalities, not only will you lose the reader's interest, but you will appear no different to every other candidate and, worst of all, it may seem that the referee doesn't really know you well enough to make a detailed case in your favour.

Your reference should:

- be congruent with your profile, positioning and goals, as stated in other parts of your application;
- augment your candidacy and reinforce your positioning by endorsing your claims or by anticipating and commenting favourably on any apparent weakness;
- enthusiastically anticipate your potential and endorse the validity and achievability of your career goals;
- avoid generalities and platitudes, and be as specific and detailed as possible, giving examples;
- comment positively on weaknesses or areas where the committee may have unanswered questions;
- include at least one criticism or cautionary point (the best kind of weakness is one that a good MBA experience will fix).

Referee fatigue

Schools each have their own specific reference forms, with their own specific questions and checkboxes to be filled in. Each one insists that referees use the dedicated form – it focuses the referees' attention on the specific questions Adcom wants answered and makes comparing candidates easier. This requirement will inevitably get you into an awkward situation with your referees, who obviously prefer to write one letter for you and send it to all concerned. There is no simple way out of this headache. You will have to judge how many times you can ask your referees to go the extra mile before tolerance wears thin. Referee fatigue is probably the single biggest limitation to the number of schools you can apply to.

Learning from the questions

One way of knowing what a reference should say is to analyse the reference forms that schools issue. The form below, from Columbia, is typical of the forms schools use and telegraphs their main concerns. You can reverse-engineer it to see the kinds of questions – often unstated – that the referee should be addressing for every school.

1. What is your relationship to, and how long have you known the applicant? Is this person still employed by your organization? (Yes/No) If 'No,' when did he/she depart? (e.g., August 1999)
The referee must confirm how well he or she knows you. This tells Adcom how heavily to weigh the opinion that follows.

2. Provide a short list of adjectives which describe the applicant's strengths.
The referee should underline your strength and value as a candidate. These should be strengths relevant to an MBA and post-MBA career. They should dovetail with what you said about yourself in the essays.

3. How does the applicant's performance compare with that of his or her peers?
The referee must make a comparative judgement. Not just that you are good, but that you are better than most.

4. How has the applicant grown during his/her employment with you? Please comment on the applicant's maturity.
The referee must address your professional growth and likely trajectory, and how ready you are for an MBA at this point.

5. Comment on the applicant's ability to work with others, including superiors, peers and subordinates. If the tables were reversed, would you enjoy working for the applicant?
The referee must address your team and group skills, and likeability.

6. In what ways could the applicant improve professionally? How does he/she accept constructive criticism?
The referee must deal with your weaknesses and career needs. The faults and lacks should broadly be the kind that an MBA will help to fix.

7. How well has the applicant made use of available opportunities? Consider his or her initiative, curiosity and motivation.
The referee must talk about your initiative, drive and ability to be a self-starter. He or she should also talk about ability to weather obstacles.

8. Comment on your observations of the applicant's ethical behavior.
The referee must explicitly deal with ethics and values.

9. What do you think motivates the candidate's application to the MBA program at Columbia Business School? Do you feel the applicant is realistic in his/her professional ambitions?
The referee must comment on your goals and reasons for doing an MBA. They must judge that it is likely that you will achieve the goal(s), and that an MBA will help this.

10. Are there any other matters which you feel we should know about the applicant?
The referee should use this space to sing any praises that did not fit into a prior question.

Here is another set, from MIT, which shows a similar and overlapping pattern, even though the questions themselves are different.

1. How long and in what capacity have you known the applicant?
As in the case above, the referee must say how well he or she knows you. This tells Adcom how heavily to weigh the opinion that follows.

2. How does the applicant stand out from others in a similar capacity?
Similar to questions 2 and 3, above. The referee should underline your strength and value as a candidate, with a particular emphasis on why you are unique. These should be strengths and uniqueness relevant to an MBA and post-MBA career and should dovetail with what you said about yourself in the essays.

3. Please provide an example of the applicant's impact on a person, group or organization.
Adcom is seeking the referee's corroboration of the fact that you are the kind of person who 'makes a difference'.

4. Please provide a representative example of how the applicant interacts with other people.
Similar to 5, above. The referee must address your interpersonal, group and team skills, using examples.

5. Which of the applicant's personal or professional characteristics would you change?
Similar to 6, above. The referee must deal with your weaknesses and career needs. The faults and lacks should broadly be the kind that an MBA will help fix.

6. Please tell us anything else you think we should know about this applicant.
Similar to 10, above.

In other words, taken together, the reference questions posed by various programs reveal Adcom's agenda for references in general. Even if the reference does not ask a particular question, or does not ask questions at all (allows a free letter format), the referee should still, broadly, follow these signposts.

Interview strategy

Interviews may look like they are about getting information about you – they are *not*. All the pertinent information about you should already be in your file and your essays. Schools interview you to get the measure of you as a person and to gauge your personality. The interview tests:

- the interpersonal dynamics and rapport you create;
- the skill and maturity of your interaction;
- your honesty and openness;
- your non-arrogant confidence;
- your communication skills and articulacy;
- your drive and purpose towards your goals;
- knowledge of the school and passion for the program.

An exam or a chat?

Don't be fooled, the interview is an exam. Take care about your appearance. Arrive early and follow formal protocol. Take your cue from the interviewer: if he or she lowers the formality of the event, follow suit. No matter what the tone of the interview, you must appear relaxed and ready to talk fluently about yourself. You want to make the event into a genial, personable interaction, even if it remains formal. In this light, feel free to ask for a clarification if you don't understand the parameters of a question. Respond to icebreakers and be appreciative of the interviewer's humour, if offered. Play your part in creating a dialogue that approaches a normal conversation – don't let it become question, answer, silence; question, answer, silence.

Be ready to talk specifics: know details about the school and program. Have prepared examples and stories (which you can adapt as necessary) on probable major question topics: goals, leadership, achievements, strengths and weaknesses. Be particularly ready for questions where your profile appears weak or your trajectory unclear, and have well-drilled responses. Don't be defensive about weaknesses in your profile. Acknowledge them, state your planned remedy and move on. Don't excuse yourself or blame anyone else. Don't be flip, cute or a smart-ass.

One of the hidden perils of interviewing is saying too little. Be ready to talk at length about where you are coming from, why you need an MBA now and what you plan to do with it. You need to breathe life into your candidacy through stories, observations and insights. Give enough detail and share enough passion to rouse the interviewer's interest. Above all, don't get stuck on the routine facts of your story that are already in your file. Remember, creating a rapport with the interviewer is more important than any single thing you

say. Concentrate primarily on how you come across, on your tone and poise, and the connection you are building.

If you don't get a chance to intersperse your questions to the interviewer naturally during the interview, you can expect to get a formal chance to ask questions at the end. Either way, target your questions on areas where the interviewer can be expected to appreciate the questions and know the answer. If you are talking to an admissions officer, you can ask specific questions about the program and how it fits your goals. If you are talking to an alumnus from five years ago, a better line of questioning may be how the school's brand holds up in the job market, or how the alumni organization really works.

Use your questions to sum up and refocus your interviewer on your strengths, your goals and your particular resonance with the program. If you bring strong skills in HR and you want to leave having underlined that fact, you may say something like: 'Given my extensive experience in applying "the balanced scorecard", will there be scope in the management accounting electives for me to continue to broaden my specialization in employee evaluation?' In all cases, keep questions at a high level: ask about the school's approach, emphasis and future direction rather than asking perfunctory questions about library resources or gym facilities (if you care, get that research done elsewhere). Don't ask questions the answers to which are available on the Web or in the student guide.

Understanding behavioural questioning

If your interviewer is savvy you will get behavioural rather than factual questions. That is, you won't get, 'What was your major at college?' but, 'Why did you choose that major?' Behavioural questions delve behind the patterns of your behaviour to get to preferences and motivations. They don't seek to know what you did in any situation, but why you did it; not how you responded, but what caused that response; not which choice you made, but why you chose it and what that says about you. Behavioural questions probe the way you behave in situations and how well you understand your behaviour. They search for the nature of the individual behind the actions that are manifest.

Navigating such questions requires that you know yourself very well: not just the details of your life, but the fabric of motivations and intentions that drive you and explain you. (The school's essay questions also follow the behavioural style and must be tackled in the same way.)

Typical behavioural interview questions are:

- Why do you want to do an MBA? Why now?
- What are your career goals? What is it about these goals that motivates you?
- What is your leadership style? How does this reflect who you are?

- What is your favourite part of your job? What would you change? Why?
- How would your colleagues describe you? Do you agree?
- What is the most difficult problem you have solved? Describe the process you used to tackle it. Is that typical of the way you solve problems? How so?
- Do you think it is better to take risks or play safe?
- How did you choose your job after college, or the one after that? Why is it time to move on?
- What is your preferred role in a group, and what does that say about you? Does anything change when the group gets close to deadline?
- How would you respond if you were faced with . . . [description of an ethical dilemma]?
- Why have you chosen to get involved in the community activities you participate in?
- How do you learn best? Is it through failure or disappointment, or by some other means?

Obviously, you must be ready for standard fact (who, what, where, when) questions as well. For example: What are your interests? Describe your typical workday. Where did you apply to after college? What will you do if you are not accepted? And so on.[2]

International applicants

Foreign applicants to US schools

Being a foreign applicant to US schools brings its own set of advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, you are exotic. You don't have to work too hard to explain how you add diversity and experience to the program.

The kinds of things you have done, the cultural differences you bring, the foreign places you have worked and the languages you speak will work in your favour, particularly if you link them to the program in specific ways: 'My experience working in Brussels on EU agribusiness regulatory issues will be relevant to my fellow students at Kellogg because . . .'

There are, however, other obstacles to negotiate:

GPA

If your college degree were from Michigan State, the admissions committee would easily know what to read into that and would draw conclusions (rightly or wrongly). But if it's from the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, chances are they won't have a clue how that rates, and you could get the benefit of the doubt. Programs generally have experts that 'translate' foreign

transcripts into the American GPA system – do not attempt to do it yourself (there is rapid grade inflation in the US and you will probably short-change yourself). Alternatively, ask your university for a transcript addendum that gives your rank in class (first, second, third, etc.) or rank in percentage terms (top 5%, top 10%, etc.).

Gmat

Part of the reason why the Gmat is so important to the admissions committee is that, while colleges vary wildly, the Gmat is a national and international standard for assessing the academic potential of allcomers. The Gmat carries more weight in an international file because the value of the foreign GPA and other parts of a foreigner's scholastic and professional background are harder to assess. If you crack the Gmat, pretty much all of the other 'indecipherable' parts of your academic past will be forgiven.

English

One aspect of a foreigner's application that always attracts special attention is English ability. Don't think the MBA program is all about numbers – spoken and written English is critical to managing the reading and academic workload and also to functioning in teams and extramurally. English ability will continue to be a key component of success in recruitment and in your professional life. Therefore, the TOEFL, the Gmat verbal score, the analytical writing assessment and your essays will all be scrutinized by the committee looking for reassurance on this matter.

Do not underestimate the negative effect that incorrect or clunky English has on your application. Your readers are almost all mother-tongue English speakers. Many of them will have an active interest in people, writing, communications, language and literature. They can tell the subtleties of good language use from bad, and they care about it. It may not be fair, but admission readers don't have the time or the patience to decide whether a mistake is non-native phrasing or whether it is carelessness, inarticulacy or stupidity. Anything less than fluent will give the perception that you are not as good as the next person.

Even foreign applicants with English as their mother tongue cannot take their communications for granted. Americans, particularly those in the business world, live in a culture with high expectations of self-expression and many specific acronyms and local coinages. The US cultural preference for blunt messages and sound-bites is not easy to reproduce, even for the foreigner with English as their mother tongue.

Separating schools

Foreign students normally have to work harder to appreciate the subtle differences between different US programs. Applying 'to an American MBA' is not

enough. The schools want to know why them particularly and in detail. It takes extra-carefully focused research and the acquisition of significant cultural knowledge for the, say, Chilean applicant to be able to distinguish between Chicago Business School and Kellogg, for example. For locals, this knowledge will not only be easier to get, but it will be more immediately culturally comprehensible.

Understanding competitiveness

Without cultural experience of the US, foreigners don't always appreciate the career and life-changing difference implied in getting into a good business school. Therefore, they don't understand the immense competitiveness they face or the ability of the admissions committee to make extraordinary demands and expect candidates to jump to fulfil them to the letter. Americans are culturally more used to the bitterly competitive, tightrope-walking nature of the application process: one foot wrong and you are in the ravine.

US applicants to foreign schools

American candidates going abroad face a different spectrum of issues. While the status of their undergraduate program or command of English will not be factors, other problems arise. Foreign programs almost all value international experience highly and will look carefully at the ability of the American applicant to operate outside of his or her milieu.

Rule number one is to show commitment to an international career. Don't make it seem like America is the only place where people know how to do business, raising the suspicion that the only reason you are thinking of coming over to London is that you were rejected from Duke last year. Show a willingness to take other education systems, other cultures, and foreign recruiters and workplaces seriously, even if they are different and make less sense (to you) than those you are familiar with. Foreign languages are a significant demonstration of positive intent.

4 What goes on after you hand in your application

Inside the admissions process

The required elements of your application – biographical information, transcripts, Gmat score, references and essays – are standard for all schools. Some ask for more references, some interview everyone, others don't interview at all or only selectively. Some ask for additional biographical summary items such as résumés and cover letters.

The admissions office administration staff will wait for all elements of your application to arrive before acting on them. As with college applications, elements of the application usually come separately from different places. As a rule, the admissions department is organized and approachable and will know which items they are waiting for. You may get periodic mail or email notices telling you what has and hasn't arrived. Once everything is complete, the file will be read by at least two but up to four or five people – more when the readers don't immediately agree on its merits. Readers do not see each others' comments. At least one of the two primary readers will be assigned to read the whole package thoroughly, while subsequent readers may just be referred to specific sections or essays for comment.

In most US schools, current students do a substantial portion of the initial reading, evaluation and sorting (working for tuition reduction or a stipend). Sometimes external readers are hired. If your file is rejected at the first round, chances are it will be a student who was primarily responsible. Where more extended, multiple readings are called for, these will be done by professional admissions staff, with senior admissions staff or designated faculty reading in the event of a question or dispute about the merits of the file, or where specialist technical or financial input is needed to judge an applicant's claims. Each reader will spend an average of between fifteen and thirty minutes on the file.

Readers are normally free to approach the file in their own way. There will be guidelines as to what to look for and how to weigh the elements, but it varies from one reader to the next what they look at first and how they progress

through the application. However, most commonly, the reader will take the following route:

1. A survey of your basic information

The following information can be gleaned from the answers you provide to questions on the application form: age; nationality; profession; amount, nature of and place of work experience; languages; special competencies, certifications, awards and promotions. This quick tour through your biographical and employment history will provide a snapshot of the main coordinates of your candidacy.

Candidates with biographical success and decorations will start to distinguish themselves, even at this first stage. The most common way candidates fail at this point is if they are too young (not enough work experience) or too old (better suited to an executive MBA), or if they don't have a primary college degree or some other basic requirement.

2. Academic assessment

The reader will then review your academic claim to a place, including GPA achieved, college attended, courses and course loads undertaken, graduate degrees or diplomas if applicable, and Gmat score. A weak academic profile or any hint that you will not cope intellectually will result in rejection. The reader may massage your GPA up a bit to compensate for harder college courses, a prior second degree or any explanatory factors that you have mentioned. He or she may even view a low GPA with some leniency if grades were on a solid upward trend, or shrug off a few B's and C's in the light of significant extramural activities and successes. Of course, a subsequent reader may view your extenuating circumstances differently and apply a different personal judgement.

Readers will definitely check for evidence of quantitative or business-related courses, and look for weakness in this area. Poor grades here are a serious handicap, probably worse even than being completely untested in this area – where at least you would retain the benefit of the doubt. The flip side is that post-college remedial courses in quantitative subjects will be considered very favourably, particularly if you do well. If you have excelled on quantitative courses at college or afterwards, you may be excused a shaky grade or two in the humanities.

3. Assessment of personal statement

The readers will then read your essays. They will get an impression on two levels. First, they want to see that the essays have been done competently and

diligently and that the questions have been answered. If you are just waffling, they might try to determine whether this is simply due to poor communications skills or whether it is something more nefarious, such as lifting from another essay set. They will want to see that points are clearly made and well organized. They will notice how thorough you have been – spelling, punctuation or typographic mistakes will cost you dearly. Adcom's favourite mistake is catching the name of a rival school in the essay set. Any lurking feeling that the application is not conscientiously done will provide them with a reason to reject it.

Readers will also judge the vision, argument, motivation and passion in your essays. They will be looking for clear, appropriate and well-thought-out short- and long-term goals, and a workable strategy to achieve those goals – a strategy that includes needing what the specific business school offers. They will evaluate the benefits you claim to be bringing to the program and the relevancy of those benefits. Readers also look for leadership potential, as well as maturity, independence, professionalism and the other attributes that were mentioned in Chapter 2.

4. Third-party assessment

Once the reader has a picture of your profile, experience and intentions, she will turn to the judgements others have made about you – the letters of reference and the interview report, if available. She will look for independent corroboration of the professional merits you claim and of the judgements she has made while reading the file. If the referees do not endorse your potential and unequivocally support your candidacy, then you will be in trouble. If significant and credible people stand up for you, and if their assessment chimes with your application message and the reader's own positive impression of you, your application will go forward.

5. The committee meeting

If the application fails at the reading stage, it is cut. There may be cases where a number of people read the file, are unsure, and then a senior admissions officer looks at the file and decides to reject it. Files that make it past these hurdles move forward to the committee stage. (Some schools interview only at this point.) The committee, which includes a quorum of admissions staff, sometimes including faculty representation, will usually review each case again in full, plus the interview report, and decide whether to make an offer, waitlist or reject. Different committees each have their own preferred method: a common one is to get the chief reader proposing the candidate (the 'sponsor' or 'champion') to go through the candidate's profile and to explain its merits and drawbacks. The others will then agree or not, and a group decision will be made.

The role of the essays

The essays are a key piece of every application. To understand the importance of the essays for admissions, you need to understand what function they really perform. They are the 'tie-breaker' between excellent candidates.

Business school is mostly a logical, quantitative, rational kind of place. Much of it is about making numbers work out and you're never far from your Excel spreadsheet. So you'd think that MBA admissions would be a logical, quantitative, rational kind of process: taking an applicant's Gmat and undergraduate scores, adding a multiple-choice personality test and a weighted average for credentials and achievements, feeding it all into a computer and admitting the top 10% or 20% would surely be the most equitable solution. Not only would this be quick and fair, but it would make operational sense too, given the thousands of applicants MBA admissions officers have to process each year.

But what really happens is that schools ask applicants to write between three and seven open-ended personal essays on their life, achievements, goals, motivations, failures, and so on. These essays absorb an inordinate amount of admissions staff time in assessment and deliberations (some schools even pay adjunct essay readers to deal with the extra workload) and introduce a large dose of subjectivity into the applications process. So, why do they keep the essay system? What makes them ask the open-ended kind of questions they do? Why do they make the application process longer, more subjective and more resource intensive than it apparently needs to be? Answering these questions is the key to knowing what you need to do to write a successful essay set.

Fine-tuning selection

To understand what's going on, put yourself in the shoes of the admissions committee whose holy grail is to (a) select the best applicants and (b) balance the skills, aptitudes, backgrounds and experience of the incoming class. Any decent school can take half of the applications it receives and throw them in the bin: 'not enough experience', 'lukewarm references', 'poor Gmat', 'too old', and so on. That's the easy part. The challenge is what to do with the top half – that is, how to distinguish between the quality candidates that remain.

The truly difficult part of Adcom's job is to distinguish between excellent candidates and super-excellent candidates, and achieve a balanced class, while operating with the rather serious handicap that they know very little about the people they are dealing with. Truth is, if they were to take the academic and fill-in-the-box data from all competitive candidates with good numbers and proven attributes and compare them all with each other, they would be remarkably similar. Generally, the college grades would be in a similar band, as

would the Gmats, the quantity and quality of work experience, the merit of references, and so on. Any other aptitude or psychometric test they could run would also not significantly separate the candidates. When they are faced with a Gmat 720/GPA 4.0 banker from Chicago, a Gmat 720/Oxbridge-graduated systems analyst from Glasgow and a Gmat 710/Chinese Fulbright scholar, and they can only take one, how are they going to choose? How can they choose correctly?

Schools set hard, open-ended, searching personal questions to allow them to choose between good applicants. Asking what really motivates her, why he needs an MBA, which of her achievements matters most and why, how he copes with failure, how she envisions her future, and reading the results over three or four pages, provides Adcom with subtle distinctions between those with an apparently equivalent good claim to admission. Through the essays, the truly compelling candidates make themselves known.

Therefore, it turns out that the essays are the only logistically viable, standardized testing instrument, which gives admissions officers the deep information about every candidate that they need in order to be able to fulfil their function of separating the great applicant from the good one. So, unless you have a stupendous 770 Gmat or you are the son of Alan Greenspan, you should assume that your essays will be the key difference between you and the other good applicants in the pool for admission. You are not going to get yourself noticed ahead of your serious competitors without a compelling personal statement. Essays count so heavily because they are the tie-breaker between excellent candidates.

Of course, face-to-face interviews perform a similar function of separation. But interviews are even more hassle for all concerned: they absorb more person-hours and most schools can't interview every candidate. Also, schools can't control the questions or the questioner, making the results harder to trust and impossible to standardize.

Rewarding strengths outside the classroom

Another reason the essays are so important is that they balance the academic bias of other parts of the file. As already stated, the admissions committee and all the people they represent know that academic results are a spectacularly *poor* predictor of business success. MBA degrees are not there to choose or to produce intellectuals. The high status of the personal essay statement, therefore, is a way for schools to show that they care about non-classroom factors, and that they are ready to provide every possible way for candidates with valuable management potential to showcase their leadership record, personality, character, maturity, dynamism, motivation and effectiveness – and that these real-world credentials count big-time in admission decisions.

Rewarding communication skills

The third key reason the essays are sought by the admissions committee is that they test the candidate's ability to communicate ideas and, in particular, to communicate them in English if the candidate is a non-native speaker. No matter what kind of statistical and quantitative Excel-jock you are, or what kind of numerical paradise you may be expecting your business career to be about, make no mistake that the ability to communicate – get ideas across to colleagues, customers, investors and others – is fundamental to business and leadership success, and becomes more so the more senior you become in an organization. This is true all over the world.

The committee doesn't need or want you to be Shakespeare, but they are looking for people who can succinctly organize information and eloquently brief a reader or a listener as they will have to do many thousands of times in their management careers. The essays test this skill and separate those who can do it from those who can't.

Meeting the essay requirements

The essays are therefore a fundamental, deciding part of your application. If you plan to 'just get them over with', don't even waste your time and money applying. Given this specific role the essays play, it follows that your task in writing them is to provide enough differentiating, high-quality material about yourself that Adcom is motivated to make those subtle distinctions in your favour. A non-communicative statement will not put sufficient distance between you and your competitors in the top half. The worst thing you can do in them is to be bland, non-communicative or to repeat information that is already in your file.

One of the tests of a good essay is the extent to which it adds value to your file, providing stories, insights and perspectives that turn you from a data set into a fully three-dimensional human being with values, passions and interesting qualities. Your personal statement should 'open a window' into your single and unique life, and through it Adcom should feel they have met you and come to know you and identify with you, so that they can distinguish you from the crowd. You achieve this by selecting and sharing personal events and stories, and analysing and reflecting on them in an honest way, so they get to understand what you stand for, are interested in or are motivated to do with your life, and why. Differentiating, high-quality material is not hard to recognize: it is anything that turns you from a set of numbers and achievements into a unique, memorable person on an interesting path.

If you are having trouble knowing what it means to add value to your file in this way, imagine yourself at a cocktail party with thirty other competing MBA applicants and one admissions officer. You all work for the same company

and you all have the identical Gmat score, but only three can be selected. You each get about five minutes to talk to her – what do you say about yourself that is interesting, insightful, provoking and memorable? That is your essay material. You've succeeded when she (or the reader) no longer thinks, 'MIT undergrad, science major, 3.8/710, ex-PWC,' but instead, 'The guy who majored in botanical studies, left consulting to create a successful small business in exotic East Asian seedlings and now needs an MBA to develop a community-friendly agribusiness worldwide. By the way, he also has big–6 consulting experience and great numbers.'

Essays also give you a chance to provide the filter through which the rest of your file is read. The things you choose to highlight, and the way you connect the dots in your life story, will influence the way the reader makes sense of your data record and her understanding of your achievements and career choices, including the choice to do an MBA at this point in your life.

There is no single formula for good essays. There are, however, many tools, techniques and precedents that will improve your message and provide a reliably good recipe for winning personal statements. Sections Three and Four in this book are devoted to these topics.

Application timing issues

Timing your application can have important consequences. Whether the school has continuous 'rolling' admissions or a series of discrete deadline dates, early on in the application process (October in the typical cycle for the following autumn) there are lots of places and by March to April there are none. The window closes steadily during this time. Most schools advise applicants to submit as early as possible, but not so early as to have to rush and compromise the quality of their submission. Schools with unusual starting dates will have different schedules, but the same general rule applies.

It is now more common for schools to use the series of deadlines approach. The deadlines are typically in October, January and March. The committee will have decided in advance what percentage of the total intake is going to be taken from each round. Generally, about 45% will be taken at the first round, the same again in the second round and the remaining 5–10% in the third round. Some schools divide more equally between these three rounds, but this is not the norm.

The key principle is that each round is its own separate mini-competition: candidates who miss out do not go forward to the next round. The school will make definite offers to the candidates it chooses, up to the quota of seats it has for that round (plus some for candidates who will decline a place); it will waitlist some and it will reject the rest. In some cases, waitlisted candidates from the first round will be reviewed again for the second round, but normally

they will only be reviewed after the final round. Once an application is denied, it will not be considered again in that admissions year.

In the first round, the field is wide open. Every part of the class profile, every nationality, every background, every skill set and every previous employer is under-represented. Here schools traditionally select the best, with little or no regard to the class mix. The second round is where the business of balancing the class begins in earnest. By this deadline the school has almost all the serious applications it is going to get, and sets about sorting the best and balancing those under consideration with the candidates who have accepted offers from the first round.

By the third (or fourth) round, there are only a handful of places left, which are given to the wild-card applicants who bring some amazing and unique attribute: the school keeps these places back so it has the power to make an offer to a truly exceptional candidate who pops up late. It is practically impossible to get in at this stage – you may be the best banker in the entire group, but if they already have enough bankers, you're out of luck.

When to apply?

The common wisdom is, if you are a strong, traditional candidate (from a common and possibly oversubscribed background such as banking or consulting) and you meet all the academic number requirements, then you should apply in the first round. The risk of waiting, if you are a conventional candidate, is that the unofficial quota for your professional profile will already be full before the second round, or full enough to lower the odds of success. If you have lower numbers and/or you come from a more unique background, it is generally better to apply in the second round, when the committee is looking for candidates that provide depth and variation to the class.

Note that for foreign students applying to US schools, any deadline after January will likely be too late to get a visa, particularly if you are not a citizen of the European Union.

A basic timeline

Timelines are made to be broken. But if you are creating a schedule to get everything done on time, it should look something like this (for a September start date):

- Spring (18 months before the start date): study for and take the Gmat. The Gmat result will frame your choice of schools and it's almost pointless to get too far into school exploration before you know where you stand. Also, an early Gmat gives you time to retake it if necessary.

- Summer: do your personal profiling (see Section Two). Retake the Gmat if necessary.
- September to October: do intensive research on the schools – go to the fairs, visit campuses, talk to current students and recent alumni. Make your selection. Get transcript requests out to your undergraduate institution and reference forms to your referees. Decide what order to tackle the applications in, do your first set of essays and submit your first application by the early, October deadline.
- November to December: do your other applications. Get each one done and mailed before you turn to the next (or you will go crazy). Get every one in by the second, January deadline.

SECTION TWO
Profile-Building Tools and Techniques

5 The profiling project

Getting admitted under competitive conditions requires you to present the most compelling portrait of yourself – situating yourself in the niche where you are most competitive and tightly arguing the fit between you and the program you want to be in. Section One dealt with the fit from the school's point of view: understanding what their needs are and therefore what they are looking for in candidates, and how this plays out in various aspects and stages of the admissions process. We now turn to the other part of the fit: you. This section offers diagnostic tools you can use to investigate and understand your profile, as well as techniques for extracting the most important and persuasive parts and consolidating them into themes and an application message.

Profiling

The aims of profiling are: (1) to create enough useful and detailed raw material, and surface enough stories about yourself, so that you can write essays that establish the richness of your background; and (2) to provide the direction that will allow you to focus your strategy and build your case. In the first phase, you explore your background for its richness and strength; in the second, you select, concentrate and consolidate your message.

In Chapter 2, we briefly explored your motives for going to business school, asking for just enough of a sketch of your background and preferences to provide the basis for choosing schools. By now you have decided which schools to target and you are moving into the phase of creating the best case to put forward to them. It is time to deepen the self-analysis and to formally consider your abilities, preferences and experiences, and strategically select from among them.

Why do it?

Profiling involves putting in the time and effort to explore the reaches of your past, including mining for knowledge you might not even know you have. It requires self-work and, by definition, not all of the work will find its way into the essays. It's tempting to leave this stage out and just get going with answering the essay questions. Resist that temptation. The work you put in here will be tapped again and again for each school you apply to and each essay you write. You can only pull out what you put in. If profiling is done once, properly, it will significantly shorten your essay writing and rewriting time.

Creating an alternative basis for essay responses

The single, crucial advantage in *a priori* profile and message building is that it allows you to create your application themes and message without regard to the bias of any particular essay questions. You provide yourself with an independent basis for writing the essays, which you then map onto the questions, rather than letting the school's agenda define your responses. When you write you are then setting about telling your story via their questions. You define the agenda. Your essays are driven by what you want the school to know. If you allow your essays to be defined by the questions, you will find it difficult to create an integrated, centred profile and your message will come out in confused bits, if at all.

You must also, of course, take care to closely answer the questions. Being off-topic is one of the cardinal sins of admissions essays and Adcom will not hesitate to penalize you for it. But if you know what you want to say, you will almost always be able to adapt it to the terms of a given question. The key is to know what you want to say before you get to the essay questions.

Preparing for behavioural questioning

The other reason for doing intensive self-assessment work is to prepare yourself for the exploratory, open-ended, behavioural nature of the essay questions you face and the demands of answering them satisfactorily. (Behavioural questioning was explained in Chapter 3.) The essay questions you get from top schools will be of the same type: they will probe your motivations and patterns of behaviour – the why's of your actions rather than asking for 'who, what, where and when' factoids. Navigating such questions competently requires that you know yourself well, not just the details of your life choices and attitudes, but the motivations behind them.

Many people think you have to have a certain type of profile to get into a top program. You don't. But whatever profile you have, you do have to demonstrate acute knowledge of self. The self-analysis you do here in the profiling

stage will provide the basis for persuasively demonstrating self-understanding in your essays. You will be able to explain to the reader not just what your formative choices and experiences are, but why they make you a valuable candidate.

Brainstorming

If you follow the profiling method suggested below, you will go through two separate profile brainstorming exercises – the first time concentrating on your personal profile, the second time on your professional profile. Brainstorming is the process of generating a free flow of ideas on a given topic. It can be done in various ways, but the general principle is the same: to provide a 'safe' space to stimulate ideas, temporarily holding back from editing or analysis. Your profile brainstorming should surface all kinds of memories, thoughts, ideas, events, experiences and insights. It will be messy. Don't hold back. Don't try to order it. The goal is to get a lot of thoughts and ideas out on the table. There will be plenty of time to clean up later. For speed and economy, it's best just to jot down the minimum keyword that relates to any one thought or event – just enough so that it makes sense to you if and when you need to flesh out the idea to use it in your application.

The more openly and honestly you do this, the more self-knowledge you will gain and the more resources you will have for communicating this knowledge to others. Getting to the self-knowledge is entirely separate from the strategic choices you will make in deciding whether and how to communicate it. You do not need to communicate everything. In fact, you will hold most of it back. So be honest with yourself. At least some of your work should be personal enough that you would not just leave it lying around for anyone to see and would think twice before you showed it to anyone but your nearest and dearest.

Methodology

Take a blank sheet of paper. Turn it sideways (landscape) and draw two vertical lines down the page, dividing the paper into three equal vertical columns. Across the top, label column one 'Points', column two 'Stories' and column three 'Analysis' (Figure 5.1). Obviously, you can do this on screen if you prefer.

1. *Points*. In this column, put down personality traits, qualities, events and influences that surface in response to the questions in each section (below). This is the column where you tag your memories and associations as they come up.
2. *Stories*. In the second column, write down keywords for the stories

Figure 5.1 The profile development table.

that demonstrate one or more of your notes in column one. Stories can be any anecdotes or vignettes of things that happened to you that demonstrate what you have listed in column one and bring it to life.

3. *Analysis*. In the third column, draw out the analysis. Considering your attributes in column one, and the stories that demonstrate them in column two, extract the juice and write what this means to you. What does any experience or event or preference or attribute or quality or goal really say about you? How do your stories elaborate who you are? How might attributes and events you have surfaced come together in an overarching insight? What are the implications of this?

Shadowing the essay process

Taking your profiling through these three stages of inquiry – attribute, story and analysis – is not a random process. It exactly anticipates the path of self-exposition you will need to achieve high performance in your essays. In the essays, you will repeatedly go through the process of:

- identifying an attribute in yourself (that is relevant to the school and its admissions criteria);
- sharing a story that demonstrates the attribute;
- extracting the lessons and implications: developing insight from your attributes and stories in ways that show the validity and competitiveness of your candidacy.

In all that you do, you will be claiming your value, demonstrating it via stories and extracting implications that show why you will be a valuable candidate. Providing attributes without analysis will turn your essay into a superficial achievement list. Attributes without stories will leave you short on evidence and believability. Analysis without stories will be too dry and philosophical. Stories without analysis will turn your essay into nothing more than a pleasant waft.

Finding and developing stories

You tell stories in your application essays for two reasons:

1. *Proving attributes*. Your claim to a personal attribute means almost nothing unless you can back it up with a factual set that illustrates and 'proves' it. The best way to provide a compelling value set is in the retelling of an event. For example, you may say you are 'cool under pressure', but what makes it more than mere hot air is when you tell the story of how you landed a Cessna on Route 505 when the pilot passed out. Claiming your 'team spirit' is one thing; telling the story of being stuck in the elevator in Taiwan with six fellow McKinsey associates at four in the morning, when you were taking a break and trying to find an all-night pizza parlour, is more compelling.
2. *Raising reader interest*. Narrative brings facts and attributes to life. Most people hate to read theory or conceptual copy but they love to read stories, particularly stories about people in difficult situations. They get sucked in and they want to find out what happened and how it turned out. Not only are stories engaging, but they are also memorable. Most people remember narrative more vividly and for longer than they do interpretation or bald data.

Tips for thinking of good stories

Search for events, moments and insights that were turning points in your life. Any time you can say 'that changed me', you are dealing with a situation where events led to a fundamental development of character, and this is likely to be a moment that speaks powerfully of you. For this reason, it will likely make for a story that can be milked for personal analysis and insight.

Other considerations in selecting a story are:

- Is it memorable, cute, dramatic, or somehow likely to stick in the mind of the reader?
- Does it have interesting and lasting imagery? Does it create scenes and pictures that stick?
- Does it have action and some imperative moving events forward, making the reader curious?

Be unfaithful to time and scale

To find and develop your story properly, it is helpful to break with the unconscious habit of representing events and experiences in your past in the

order in which they happened, or being bound by the relative time prominence they assumed. Length of time in an essay does not have to be faithful to length of time in life. Prominence of a story in life does not have to be faithful to prominence of a story in your essays. Liberate yourself to move freely through your past, looking for the things that have the most personal and emotional prominence, or which provide the basis for glimpses of self-insight. Develop stories around those moments and exclude everything else.

For example, say you spent ten years in hockey training, tournaments and hockey camp, and one day, through a series of accidents, you took part in a ballet class warm-up – and that totally changed your perspective. You are perfectly within your rights to talk about that one day. Similarly, you can have spent six years at General Motors and you could choose to talk only about a single late-night conversation you had with the janitor.

Section Three of this book deals further with writing techniques that will help you zone in on what's interesting and relevant, lengthen 'interesting time' and cut the rest that drags your essay down.

Small is beautiful too

In searching for stories, don't confine yourself to fantastic and memorable events: the time you saved the lives of ten people stranded by a forest fire and won a bravery medal, for example. The best stories are sometimes about simple, everyday, slice-of-life incidents: locking your keys in the car, say. Written in an engaging way, they can provide insight into your values, motivations, fears and personal philosophy.

Formative stories are valuable

Most stories are demonstrative: they show you demonstrating an attribute. But a story can also be a tale about the formation of an attribute. An example is how your grandfather peppered you with spelling bee questions every time he came to the house and would give you 5 cents for every one you got right. Soon you were first in your class in English, and that's where your passion for languages started.

Subjective reality is a safe space

In picking meaningful moments that are worthy of consideration, recognize the difference between subjective and objective reality: what happened versus what it meant to you. Something or someone can objectively be a tiny part of your life, but subjectively be enormous. It is ethically compromised to claim an experience was objectively more that it actually was – that is, to falsify information. You should not claim that you were on the team that won the national high school athletics 4×400 m, when in fact you won a local school derby. But you are absolutely entitled to say that your derby win was the most

important event of your adolescence and the turning point of your life, or express any other subjective association you choose to. Adcom is interested in your personality and subjectivity. You are invited to blow a molehill of an event up into a big rock candy mountain of an experience, as long as you clearly represent it as your subjective experience.

6 Personal profile analysis

On the page on which you drew the three columns (see Chapter 5), make keyword lists responding to the following questions (and questions you pose yourself on the following topics, Figure 6.1:

1. Personal features and attributes

Points: In the first column, list the words you use when you describe yourself. What are your defining personality traits? What are your key characteristics and qualities? Are you a thinker or a doer? Collaborative or self-reliant? Intense? Focused? Competitive? Analytical? Creative? What words would your friends use to characterize you?

Stories: In column two, think of stories related to your characteristics. What events in your life corroborate the characteristics you have written in column one?

Analysis: In the third column, draw out the juice from your list of characteristics and associated stories. What do they say about you?

If you are community minded, and you have a story about volunteering at an elderly persons home once a month, what would this tell someone about you? If you are a 'techie' and your illuminating story is how you once wrote your own applet to get your cellphone to interact with your Palm, what does that say about you?

2. Activities

Points: Actions speak louder than words. Again in column one, make a list of your most important daily activities – large and small. What do you do for fun?

Points	Stories	Analysis
PERSONAL FEATURES – Independent – More driven than most – Self = hard to please – Thrive on recognition – Big picture guy	– Time when Cedric asked me to be best man at his wedding but I refused. – Website publishing fiasco events and my intervention.	– Shows the ability to take a principled stand. Also good interpersonal diplomacy. – Cool head under pressure. Also a certain tendency to shoot my mouth off, which I am working on. Better at getting things done than dealing with organizational politics.
ACTIVITIES – Music gigs – Outdoor expeditions – Read two daily papers – Foster care centre visits – Leaders' tour to Cuba	– Papers: How I got to be current affairs analyst for high school newspaper.	
ACHIEVEMENTS – Leadership award – Made associate – Helped little Barry cope with deafness		

Figure 6.1 Example of a profile development table.

What do you do at the weekends? What gets you up early and/or makes you stay up late? What do you hate to do? What activities could you not give up? Perhaps you play in a hip-hop band, or you go off on archaeological digs in your vacation time. Also, consider any activities that place you in a community – which community? Maybe you lead activities at a youth chess camp in Bologna every summer, or do pro-bono legal consulting, for example. How are you active for a cause other than yourself?

Stories: In column two, again think of stories related to your activities. How at that chess camp, for example, you held a little boy's hand as he threw a tantrum and you slowly taught him the importance of losing with dignity.

Analysis: In the final column, once again draw out the juice from your lists of activities and associated stories. How do your activities show who you are?

Why are you motivated to do them? Why do you do what you do and not something else with your free time?

3. Accomplishments and achievements

Points: Consider your achievements in the academic, communal and personal realms. (Professional activities will be considered in Chapter 7.) What are your major accomplishments? Have you overcome unusual obstacles? Where have you excelled? What have you done that makes you really proud? Does any achievement distinguish you from everyone else? When have you struggled hard for something and succeeded? Remember that sometimes a small personal achievement says far more about you than a major award. Do you have a personal success that hardly anyone knows about? Do you have a small daily triumph?

Stories: Stories should come easily here – behind each success worth having will be a tale of struggle and overcoming worth telling.

Analysis: Why do you consider your achievements to be achievements? What about your accomplishments fits with your motivations and aspirations? How have your achievements so far brought you closer to being the person you aspire to be? Why?

4. Skills and strengths

Points: Your achievements listed in (3) above will be based on strengths of ability, or character. What are these? What is behind your accomplishments that made them possible? List them in column one. Think what other people who know you well might consider your strengths to be.

Stories: The stories that tell of your strengths may be very similar to the stories of your accomplishments – but there may be others. Note any event that would demonstrate to an outsider what your special abilities are.

Analysis: Consider the implications of your strengths. How do they shape your profile and your sense of self? How have they affected your choices in the past and how will they shape them in the future? How do they affect your personal aspirations?

5. Difficulties, failures and weaknesses

Points: When and how have you messed up in your non-working life? Have you ever worked and struggled for something and still not got it? What has been the time of greatest adversity? What is your most painful memory of failing yourself, or someone you love or respect, or a group? List the weaknesses that underlie your failures.

Nobody finds it easy to think about their weaknesses and failures. But everyone has them. Even Jack Welch blemished his record. Don't duck this part of the profile analysis. Don't look for excuses or blame other people or circumstances. The ability to own up to weaknesses and failures is an index of maturity, and maturity is one of the key golden applicant attributes (see Chapter 2). If you can't see or can't own up to your weaknesses, you are not ready to hold a responsible position in a company, and therefore you are not ready for admission to an MBA. The admissions committee will be far less interested in your specific failures than whether you have the maturity to recognize and address them.

Stories: What are the stories of your failures? Face them and write them down.

Analysis: What part have you played in your failures (the part that was not bad luck or a quirk of circumstances)? Are there patterns of weaknesses that consistently get you into trouble? What have you done to work on this? How might you do things differently next time? How have you responded to adversity? What positive learning has come out of your experience? How have your actions or perspectives changed as a result?

6. Leadership

Points: Consider times when you have been in a leadership position in any circumstances other than work. (Professional leadership is dealt with in Chapter 7.) Note the key leadership opportunities you have had. Think of occasions when you have been responsible for coordinating, influencing or motivating a group, or when you have been directly responsible for the outcome of a group effort. Remember that leadership *always* involves other people, in the public domain.

Stories: What are the anecdotes you can tell about your leadership experiences? What went right? What went wrong? How did it turn out?

Analysis: What have you learned about leadership? What have your leadership experiences taught you about your approach to leadership or your leadership

style? How do you influence, how do you motivate, how do you solve problems? What does this say about the kind of person you are?

7. Major influences: people

Points: List the people who have influenced you in your life. Who have you looked up to in the past and who do you look up to now? Who are your mentors, idols and role models? Who do you aspire to be like?

Stories: What are the stories behind your relationships with your role models? What impressive interactions have you had that makes you think of them in this way? Can you bring the quality time spent with a mentor to life through an anecdote?

Analysis: Why are these people your idols and mentors – what is it about them that you admire? What are the qualities in them that you aspire to? How have they influenced your life or your decisions?

8. Major influences: culture, art, books, movies

Points: What are your favourite books, movies, works of art, music or other profound influences that have shaped your perspective in a meaningful way? Which influences were once powerful but no longer are?

Stories: Do you have stories that tell of your relationship with these shaping forces? Perhaps you stayed up all night when you were ten, reading *Tom Sawyer*; or when you were a student in Illinois you saw an aerobatics display that changed your life. Take us there.

Analysis: Why were, or are, your significant influences so compelling to you? What did you, or do you, get from them? What does this say about your character and preferences? How have you moved on from certain influences to others? What does this say about your development? Be frank with yourself about your influences. If you'd like your main influence to be Churchill's speeches, but it is in fact 'The Simpsons', don't kid yourself. (Learn that you are probably a bit cynical, ironic and irreverent – that can also play well in an essay.)

9. Life-changing events and experiences

Points: List the major events that changed your life – things that influenced you so profoundly that you were not the same afterwards, or you couldn't

think about yourself in the same way again. These could be such momentous experiences as becoming a parent, emigrating, losing a family member, or nearly drowning. Or they could be more experiential, such as living abroad, getting your movie optioned or being the first member of your family to go to college. They could be anything that fundamentally changed your outlook. Identify the major crossroads you have come to in your life, decisions you have wrestled with and the choices you made.

Stories: These events, experiences and decisions are all going to be stories in themselves – list them as story possibilities.

Analysis: How have major events in your life changed you? How are you different now? How are you the same? When you had hard choices to make, why did you choose the route you chose? Would you do the same again, and why or why not? How have you grown? How are you different to who you used to be?

How far back?

It's tricky to know how far back you should reach in your life when preparing to make your case in the MBA essay questions. Generally, essays are weakened by a focus on childhood and adolescence, which is often seen as backward-looking and possibly avoiding adult issues. So the rule is to keep to stories from the last five years. However, the more momentous the distant past event or experience, the more it is poignant and relevant to your adulthood, and therefore the more usable it remains.

10. Diversity and contribution

Points: Everyone has diversity to offer. List the set of skills, experiences and qualities that distinguish you from everyone else. What about you and the mix of forces and circumstances in your background is unique? Which unusual qualities and experiences can you contribute to the school, your class and your group? If you were to get a letter from the admissions committee saying they had admitted you solely because you bring one super-special quality, skill or experience to the class, what would that one thing be?

Stories: What are the stories and events associated with your unique individuality? How did you come to develop a unique skill? How has your distinguishing attribute played out in a real-life situation?

Analysis: How does this difference affect you? How does it enrich the lives of those around you? How has it added to or affected your personal interactions and relationships? How has it shaped your perceptions? How does it affect your life goals?

11. Values and philosophy

Points: What are your most important principles and values? If you could change the world, what would you do first? Have you experienced moments of clarity and insight into yourself and/or the world? What were they? Have the lessons you have learned in your life come together in a set of personal principles? What would you want written on your tombstone? What do you concretely do that speaks of your values? Which causes do you support financially or as a volunteer?

Stories: What are the stories that demonstrate your values in action? What events tell of how you developed your values or personal philosophy? Perhaps your step-aunt took you to an Indian reservation when you were a teenager. Or, maybe you spent the last year unemployed. What significant things have happened to you that have reaffirmed or challenged your values – and how did you respond?

Analysis: What do your values and the changes in your values over time say about you? How do your principles or your outlook on life affect the way you manage yourself in your day-to-day life? How do they affect how you interact with other people? How does that change what you do with your time and who you do it with?

12. Personal goals

Points: What are your non-professional aspirations? (Professional goals are dealt with in Chapter 7.) If you could pursue any dream right now, regardless of skill, money or other restrictions, what would it be? What do you want to do with your life? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider it a success? Connect your goals to the MBA: Why do you want to spend two years getting an MBA? How is the degree necessary for the fulfilment of your personal goals? Apart from financial and career success, how will your MBA meet your emotional, social and family needs?

If you are really stuck determining your goals, try the following exercise. On a sheet of paper or a blank screen, write the heading '20 July 2056' and write 'note to biographer'. Underneath review your life, starting with what happened right after business school, what that led to and what came after. Write it as you would most like to see it unfold. What you get will be your personal and professional aspirations.

Stories: What events have happened to you that developed your aspirations and made you see your goals more clearly?

Analysis: What do your goals tell you about yourself? Why are these your goals rather than others? What, if anything, has happened along the way to change your aspirations or make some more important than others? What does that say about where you want to focus your life's energy and purpose?

7 Professional profile analysis

This chapter allows you to explore and understand your professional profile, asking similar questions to those you have just posed in developing your personal profile. As in Chapter 5, take a sheet of paper and draw two vertical lines down the page, dividing the paper into three columns. Across the top, label column one 'Features and attributes', column two 'Stories' and column three 'Analysis'.

Starting on the left, make keyword lists, responding to the following questions (or questions you pose yourself on the following topics):

1. Characteristics and qualities

Points: List your professional characteristics and qualities. What are the words that you would use to describe yourself at work, or in work-like situations? What are you like in the office? Are you good in groups? Are you a patient planner or 'do-and-see' type? Do you promote change or stability? Do you chafe under supervision? Do you prefer to be left alone to do what you need to do, or do you enjoy constant interaction? What words would your work colleagues use to characterize you?

Stories: In the second column, think of anecdotes that demonstrate the professional qualities you claim. What events in the workplace have led you to develop your professional dispensation? What occurrences demonstrate your valuable attributes?

Analysis: Do your various attributes concentrate in certain areas, for example organizational skills, creative skills or strategy skills? What are the implications of this? Why are your professional characteristics and qualities the ones you adopt in work situations? What does that say about the way you like to work, or the kinds of work situations you promote, or the kinds of people you like to work with?

2. Activities

Points: Think of your work day – either at your current job or previous full-time or part-time jobs that you have enjoyed. List your most important daily activities. How do you spend your time when you have a choice? Are you in meetings? Are you in front of customers? Do you do site visits or are you mostly behind a desk? Which activities do you hate to do? Which could you not give up? For what, other than money, would you happily get to the office early and stay late?

Stories: What war stories do you have related to your work life? Was there a time when you stared down the boss? What about the all-nighters you have pulled, or the laughs you have shared? What are the stories worth telling?

Analysis: In the third column, consider the implications of your activities at work (bearing in mind that you very often don't get to do what you want to at work, particularly when you are starting out). Nevertheless, it is likely that some part of what you have done has been your choice. Perhaps you spent a lot of time doing financial spreadsheets and that precision of analysis was gratifying to you. Perhaps you got to travel a lot and your work paid for you to learn Portuguese, and that was meaningful. Why did 'what worked for you' work for you? What does this say about you and the kind of professional activities you will want to be involved with in the future?

3. Accomplishments

Points: Consider your professional achievements so far. What are your major accomplishments? Where have you overcome unusual obstacles? Where have you excelled? What have you done that makes you really proud? Remember that sometimes a small personal achievement says far more about you than a major award. Do you have a professional success that has not been recognized but is still important to you?

Stories: Tell the story that you love to tell: your finest hour in the workplace. How you read the situation right, made the right moves and everyone got to hear about it.

Analysis: Why do you value these specific achievements? What does this say about your professional motivations and your future aspirations? How and why have your achievements so far brought you closer to the career you want, and to being the career professional you want to be?

4. Skills and strengths

Points: Your professional achievements will point to a set of skills and strengths. List them. Also write down what other people who know you well in the office would say your strengths are.

Stories: Think of workplace stories that prove you have the abilities you claim. If you are the meticulous attention-to-detail type, which events in your work history show this? If you are a charismatic motivator, what story proves it? The stories that tell of your professional strengths may be very similar to the stories of your accomplishments, but don't let that stop you looking for others.

Analysis: Consider the implications of your workplace strengths. How do they shape your professional profile and your sense of yourself at work? How have they affected your choices in the past and how will they shape them in the future? How do they affect your career aspirations? How do your strengths come together in such a way as may be useful to an MBA class, and in the future to an employer?

5. Difficulties and failures

Points: Think of times when you had professional difficulties and/or failed in a work context. When and how have you messed up? Have you ever been expected to master some task or new skill and failed at it? Have you worked towards a job, or a promotion, and missed out? Have you failed others who were counting on you, or whose work success was riding on yours?

Stories: What are the stories of your work failures? Face them and be ready to tell them without ducking the blame or pointing fingers.

Analysis: What part have you played in your failures? What have you done to correct this? How have you responded to adversity? What does this say about your attitude to failure? On the positive side, what good learning has come out of your experience? How might you do things differently next time? How has your perspective on work or life changed as a result?

6. Weaknesses and inexperience

Points: Failures that are not attributable to bad luck or others' mistakes will point to weaknesses or inexperience in your profile. Neither weaknesses nor inexperience are bad: the MBA is there to fix them – if you were perfect you wouldn't be applying, and you certainly wouldn't be accepted. So, what are

the factors that caused your project to go down? What is the weakness or pattern of weaknesses that regularly gets you into trouble?

Stories: Your stories of professional weaknesses will go hand-in-glove with stories of failure. There may also be stories of where you were able to forestall failure because you were alive to your weaknesses and compensated early enough.

Analysis: Do your weaknesses give insight into you? Perhaps they point to preferences, fears or ingrained compensation mechanisms? Does this take you to territory you have learned to avoid, or where you have learned to get help, or to cope in some other way? How have weaknesses affected what you chose to do in the past, and how might they shape what you choose to do and what you will be sure to avoid doing in your future career?

7. Leadership

Points: What leadership opportunities have you had in your professional life so far? Remember, often leadership is disguised and comes without a title or perks. Think of the occasions when you have directed the outcome of a project or part of a project, or have been responsible for coordinating or motivating others.

Stories: What are the anecdotes you can tell about your leadership experiences? What were the times that worked the best, or the worst, or taught you the most?

Analysis: What have you learned about leadership in the workplace? Bearing in mind that leadership is something you will spend your whole life learning, what have you yet to learn (that an MBA could teach you, perhaps)? What have your early investigations in leadership taught you about the kind of leader you are becoming? Are there patterns to the ways you motivate and influence others, and how do these reflect your personality? Is this as you would wish it, or would you want to redirect yourself using different leadership skills?

8. Influences

Points: List the people you have met in professional situations who have influenced your career and your career choices. Who do you look up to? Who do you aspire to be like? Do you admire your boss? If so, why? If not, why not? Are there any other strong influences in your professional life – books or other resources?

Stories: What are the stories behind your relationships with your professional

mentors and role models? What events come to mind when you think of how they have affected you? What experiences have you shared that make you think of them positively?

Analysis: Why are these people your idols and mentors – what is it about them that you respect? What are the qualities you aspire to? How has their influence led you to becoming what you are today? How will it continue to influence your life and choices? How does your opinion of your mentor suggest the kind of mentor you aspire to be one day?

9. Change and growth experiences

Points: List the key events that have shaped your professional life to date. What are the major crossroads you have come to in your career since college? What decisions in particular have you had to wrestle with, and what was the decision you took? Also, consider how you have changed since day one at your first real job. What do you know now that you didn't know then? Have you moved into a position of greater responsibility? What else has caused you to grow and change professionally?

Stories: Your career and work choices are all little stories in themselves. What was the dilemma, what were the circumstances, what did your loved ones want you to do? Did you do it or not? Then what happened?

Analysis: How have the significant experiences and decisions in your career shaped and changed you into what you are today? Which parts of your professional skills and your professionalism have really grown? Where you have had hard choices to make, what made you choose the route you chose and would you do the same thing again? How do you feel about the professional field you are in? What has reinforced your certainty that this field is ideally suited for you and prompted you to pursue it further via an MBA? Or, what has led you to want to change career emphasis via an MBA?

10. Difference and diversity in the workplace

Points: What is it about you and the mix of forces and circumstances in your work background that is unique? What is it about your set of professional skills or experiences that distinguishes you from most people in your office? Which valuable proficiency or experiences can you contribute to the school, your section and your group? If you were to get a letter from the admissions committee saying they had admitted you because you bring one, single, hard-to-find special professional skill or experience to the class, what might that be?

Stories: What are the stories and events associated with your special professional attributes? How did you come to develop your unique mix of skills? Is there a case where you have added a unique attribute to those of others to enhance a group's success?

Analysis: How does your difference or special proficiency influence who you are at work and who you might become? How might it enrich those working around you?

11. Values and philosophy

Points: Have the work lessons you have learned so far come together in a set of principles which influence the way you act? What are these? Have you developed insight into yourself in relation to the world of work – how you want to work, what you want to do and who you want to work with? Do you have a professional philosophy or code of honour and is it different from your personal philosophy? What do you currently do in the workplace that concretely speaks of your values?

Stories: What anecdotes can you tell about events that have shaped and developed your value set? Has anything happened to you along the way that has tested or reaffirmed those values, and how did you respond?

Analysis: How does your professional code and outlook affect the way you manage yourself and other people? How do you get your professional values into your everyday reality? How do they affect what you do and how you do it? What does that say about the kind of career choices you are likely to make?

12. Goals

Points: What important things do you want to do in your career? What are your dreams in the long term and what short-term goals will take you there? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your professional life a success? What will it look like, if it all works out?

Stories: What events have happened, or what anecdotes can you share, which show when and how you began to see your goals more clearly and so came to develop your career aspirations?

Analysis: Why are your goals the goals that fit you? What does this say about your priorities? What does that tell you about what you need from a career? How and why does the MBA fit into these professional aspirations? Going

beyond the general benefit of the MBA, how will your degree promote and accelerate your career and lead you to higher, more fulfilling achievement? What makes the time and money sacrifice absolutely necessary?

A note on goals and future clarity

If you are like most people, your career aspirations coming out of business school will be different to your stated aspirations going into it. Most people don't really know what they are going to do when they have finished their MBA, and many change direction various times while at school. If you don't know your own mind exactly at this point, congratulations, you're human. However, the reality is that the better applications are those that present very clear short- and long-term goals. Pick your current strongest likelihood for a career goal and back it with every ounce of persuasion you have.

Extracting the value

If you've done this brainstorming honestly and thoroughly, you should have a lot of notes across three columns, over various pages. Lots of stuff should have come to the surface for you to chew over. The next steps are:

- to select what you need to build a clear profile, with a definitive message and clear themes;
- to map your message onto the questions;
- to plan, write and edit your essays.

The first of these steps will be dealt with in Chapter 8. The following two are the topics of Sections Three and Four.

8 Positioning, messaging and mapping

We are now at the point where you will sift and select from your brainstorming, choosing and arranging the material you want to convey. The first thing to understand in moving to this, the profile-definition stage of your application, is that you cannot and should not try to say everything important about yourself, not even all the positive things. You will just overwhelm and confuse your reader, who has hundreds of applications to read and only a few minutes for your file anyway. Your best hope is that the admissions officer will grasp and remember the key points of your profile. Therefore, you should aim to extract and communicate only the most important things about you – the things about you that Adcom simply *must* know. You don't want to dilute or cloud these main points with a jostling mass of competing information. Simplicity and focus are your best weapons.

Avoid 'achievement soup'

If you are able to extract your key points and focus on them, you will avoid one of the standard mistakes in business school applications. Applicants jam their essays with every positive point they have, for fear that whichever one they omit will be the secret key that turns the lock in the gates of admission. There is no such key. Essay stuffing hurts you because it does not allow you to develop a clear portrait of yourself, or a memorable message, or to make a cogent argument for your admission, or to demonstrate any real self-understanding. It does not allow you to differentiate yourself from the next applicant – whose record will also be full of good points.

Serve the reader

It's helpful to think of creating the kind of experience for your reader that you would if you were having her to dinner in your home. You would consider all the possible food you could buy, and all the things you could cook, and *exclude* most of it. You would settle on one starter, one soup, one main course and one dessert. Your menu might have a few common elements or spices running

through it (an Indian theme, for example). You would then shop, chop, cook and present the meal in three or four elegant courses. You wouldn't take everything out of the refrigerator, empty the larder and take down from the shelves all your condiments and put everything onto the dinner table and ask *her* to figure out what goes with what and to cook the meal.

It takes guts to leave out parts of your story. But to nourish your reader properly you have to pick a meal plan and stick with it. You have to be ruthless in leaving out interesting ingredients because it is your job – not the reader's job – to select, prepare and present just one information meal. You must make the call as to the one best meal you can create with your available ingredients, and you must prepare it to be attractive to consume and easy to digest. Each essay in your set then becomes like a course in a fine dinner, expanding one, or at most two, of the ideas that contributes to and is thematically integrated into the whole meal.

Selecting and grouping: extracting themes

To focus your message wisely, you first have to sort and group your data. Look across your notes, across all the things you've done and all the things you are and all the ways you do things, at your memories, your stories, your preferences, your aspirations. Look for patterns and themes – words, ideas or situations that show up repeatedly. Note down anything that links different pieces together, or which suggests itself as a grouping mechanism in telling the story of who you are.

For example, you may have achieved your Padi 'Dive Master' certification, led a student outreach trip in Kosovo or helped immigrants learn how to apply for social services, which could all be grouped under a 'practical leadership' theme. Or you may have won a maths Olympiad, worked in tax consulting for PWC or developed your own method for beating the House in Vegas, which could all be grouped under a 'superior quant' label. There are no right or wrong categories.

As you group your brainstorming results in this way, your notes may point to, for example, a 'people person', 'foreign experience', 'biomedical competencies', 'creative problem solver' or 'language buff'. In other words, you are looking for organizing categories or grouping devices or themes that summarize various pieces of who you are or what you've done or where your interests and skills lie – any unifying category that helps make overarching sense of your story and synthesize your apparently diverse personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole. Each group organizes the events and stories in your life into bigger, more easily understandable units.

The groups you settle on are, in rough form, the key points or value themes of your application and the building blocks of your message to the admissions

committee. They are the points about you that you want the admissions officer to get, if he gets nothing else. They are the basis of your message and the platform for your election to business school. You will structure your essay set around them, repeating them many times in different ways to drive home the point to your busy, distracted reader.

Themes connect and integrate different parts of your story and they are what give your application its cohesion. Every individual point you make now has – via the theme it links to – a way to become part of the larger pattern and argument you are presenting. When your themes are in place, any time you tell a story or invoke a memory, or an aspiration, it will no longer just be a loose data piece – you will be able to lead the reader to see how it fits consistently within the group of points going in the same direction. This allows you to create a message that is richly detailed and yet is easily followed.

Sometimes, your theme may be the obvious link between different activities you are involved in; at other times, it may take a bit of massaging to get from the activities and interests to the underlying theme. For example, it is likely (but not essential) that one theme will derive from your professional specialty, but you may have to define it more broadly than it first appears. So, if your background is in software development, for example, you might take it beyond merely IT and link it with other things you do to create a theme around being a 'designer of complex solutions'. Similarly, if you are a NASA engineer, your theme could simply be 'engineering expert', but it could also be linked with other activities and elaborated to 'frontier technology engineer'. If you are a lawyer, you could create a theme around legal skills, but, depending what else you've done, a more telling theme might be something like 'dispute and negotiations expert'.

Theme example

To demonstrate how themes may be used, consider the following example. Say you are a Mexican with an undergraduate degree in politics and economics and your main work experience has been with the Mexican embassy in Ottawa. Assume also that you have a passion for software, and a long track record of working with children, particularly those from underprivileged backgrounds. The themes you arrive at might be: (1) 'political animal with diplomatic savvy'; (2) 'software and Web expert'; and (3) 'child mentor'.

In your essays, in every question, you would make points and tell stories that reinforce these themes. If asked for your best achievement – although you have many – you might choose the time you got a child in an orphanage to be interested in the world again by leaving a Web-interactive pocket computer game at his bedside. That is, you would be promoting your child mentor theme and your software theme. Or, if you got a question about your teamwork abilities, you could talk about the time you used your diplomatic skills to

save an embassy task force from breaking down, promoting your diplomatic theme along the way, and so on.

Positioning: which themes to choose

The themes you arrive at will categorize you and therefore define your application and position it with regard to the competition. As mentioned in Section One, your categorization directly affects who you compete with: the people with the same personal or professional backgrounds, or the same aspirations, compete with each other in a mini-race for admissions (for the purposes of class balance, a school will only let in so many McKinsey consultants, or so many Wall Street aspirants, or so many Chinese applicants). Because your positioning feeds into the school's positioning of you (depending on how well you communicate, they may not be identical), you should expect to be competing directly against the people who position themselves in more or less the same way as you do.

If you can – that is, if you have unusual experience and aspirations in your profile – you should choose less common themes and so position yourself outside of oversubscribed applicant markers and aspirations. If everyone else is an engineer wanting to become a management consultant, you want to be a medical systems engineer seeking to privatize hospitals in Peru, or a satellite engineer looking for equity partners to roll up independent multimedia service providers.

Even if you are a very mainstream applicant, with mainstream employment goals, you can still find different and memorable defining themes. You may not be able to do anything about being an Indian computer science major with small-business experience, but with judicious grouping and a creative approach you can marginally differentiate your positioning. By playing up your Pakistani relatives and your volunteer experience in Kashmir, for example, you could use a 'bi-nationalist' or 'internationalist' theme to put yourself into a category where fewer competitors are likely to be.

Almost any non-trivial theme can work – the more interesting the better – as long as you can connect it to your value proposition and your proposed future. However, try to avoid being bound by generic 'MBA-type' themes, such as 'responsibility', 'people person', 'team player', 'community helper', and so on. Go for themes that speak about you and you alone, that really do encapsulate your singular identity and achievements and passions. You cannot separate yourself from the crowd if your profile never escapes the default categories.

In creating your value themes, stay clear of the themes of 'leadership' and 'success', because these will inevitably be a big part of your application anyway. They are the default themes that everyone, including you, must carry. Also try to avoid themes around the MBA core courses – you don't want to be 'marketing

expert' or 'financial genius'. Not only is it uncreative, but too much of this could also suggest you may be sufficiently skilled to achieve your goals without the MBA, and your place could go to someone with apparently more to gain from being in the classroom.

Extracting and refining your themes is a crucial task. Don't skimp on it. Once you arrive at the right, powerful, persuasive value points for you, your application message will more or less write itself and your task in your essays will be greatly simplified. In general, between two and four themes is fine. Two will suffice if they are especially complex and multifaceted, or if the school only requires very short essays. Otherwise, you will need three or four.

The application message

When you take your two to four themes together, and add the stock topics of leadership and success, the key aspects of your past and the interesting things you want to do with your future, you'll get your message. Your message is that sentence or three that sums up who you are, what you stand for, what you want to do and why you need to go to business school to do it. It is your application 'take-away': the absolute core of what you want the admissions officer to know; what you want to be impressed on her brain after she has closed your file; what you want her to remember about you a month later when all the details of your story are long forgotten; and what will come to mind when she sees you in the school's hallway on your way to class a year later.

In the Mexican example above, your message might be: 'Business school will build on my diplomatic background, giving me the training and contacts to build a large-scale Web-based initiative involving children from the US, Mexico and Canada. It will give me the credibility and skills to fundraise, develop and lead this dream project.'

Applying marketing principles

If you recognize the construction of a clear, themed, goal-oriented message targeted to the needs and interests of a particular audience as classic marketing – you are right. As explained in Chapter 1, that is exactly what you are doing. You are positioning yourself as attractively as possible in the eyes of your consumer, fitting with their needs while differentiating yourself from your competition; and finding the clearest and most compelling way to express this differentiated value.

Note that excluding extraneous data is also a crucial marketing technique. When General Motors launches a car, they could tell you a hundred things about it, but they don't. They may create a marketing message for 'Car A' using the interweaving themes of safety, comfort and style. 'Car B' might be positioned

as a youthful, active, performance car. 'Car C' may be framed with the themes of enviro-friendliness, good fuel consumption and advanced engineering. In each case, marketing professionals are choosing and expressing themes to organize the transfer of a clear, swift message that will resonate with a chosen target segment. Everything else is excluded from the communication.

In the case of MBA admissions, your target segment is known and fixed. With small exceptions, admissions officers need and want to see the same things in candidates (as defined in the attributes section in Chapter 2). Knowing who they are and what they are looking for, your job is to find the parts of your profile that correlate with these requirements and preferences. You then need to construct a themed message that expresses your differentiated and superior value in these desirable areas – just like marketing anywhere. You will repeat your message in various different and subtle ways throughout your essays, and indeed throughout the whole application 'campaign', from the essays to the references to the interviews. Repetition clarifies and reinforces your message.

The alternative communications metaphor, as mentioned above, is thinking of yourself as the politician campaigning for election: you simplify your candidacy by creating themes (causes) that interweave to become an overall message (a platform). You research the needs of your 'electorate', devising a position closer to those needs than your competing politicians do, and therein become electable because of differentiated and superior value. You repeat your message at every opportunity, judiciously adapting it to different circumstances. When answering questions, you credibly tackle the question – but, in fact, you always find a way to insert your campaign platform message.

Message techniques

Staying on message

Among both sales staff and politicians on the campaign trail, you will often hear handlers repeat the communications mantra: 'stay on message!' This means, don't stray from the topic you want the target audience to know about, and how you have decided to tell them about it. Avoid blurring your message with extraneous information. Don't develop other, potentially confusing points that might be challengeable or at odds with your basic position or the position of your product.

In the same way, in the essays and in your file as a whole, your task is to define your message and then stick to it. You can delve widely into your past and your future, your successes, interests, values and beliefs, but all the things you say have finally to be woven tightly into one clear message, and that message is the only thing you should really concern yourself with. If it is not 'on message', don't say it.

The elevator speech

One way to focus and simplify your message is to do the following exercise. Imagine you get into an elevator at the ground floor with the head of admissions from your dream school. You recognize her from the glossy brochure in the lobby. She's already pressed the button for the eighteenth floor. You now have about forty-five seconds to introduce yourself and to say the most important things about you, including why you are applying, and to leave a memorable, lasting impression so that as she leaves she says: 'That's very interesting – what's your name again? I'll certainly look out for your application.'

These forty-five seconds are your 'elevator speech'. Your message will be about three to six sentences long. It will serve you to have written it out and learned it by heart so that every time you need to explain briefly and clearly who you are and why you are applying, you will be able to do it faultlessly. Write it down, print it out, have it pinned to the notice board above your desk. Say it to yourself before you begin work on your essays. If you are going for an interview, practise it until you can say it in your sleep.

Labelling

When people are dealing with message statements all the time, even a short message can be unwieldy. It will commonly be contracted to no more than a label. The label may not even be particularly appropriate or accurate, but will nevertheless be the quick handle that everyone refers to.

For example, if members of the admissions committee were referring among themselves to the Mexican applicant described above, they might refer loosely to 'the Mexican diplomat' or 'the Mexican child project guy'. These labels are not carefully thought out. They just express, in a busy admissions office, what appears at a casual glance to be the most distinctive profile markers that define a candidate. The next file that comes up could be 'the ABN-Amro fixed-equity guy', 'the Bridge-player' or 'Hans, the Swedish dog-breeder'.

Your label is important because it makes a difference if you become labelled with something interesting and valuable-sounding that can have a positive influence on undecided members of the committee, or something generic or flippant-sounding that could harm your chances. You can't decide your label, but you can influence what it is and make it more likely that it works in your favour. That is, you can work to make sure that your label is in fact an accurate contraction of your differentiated, valuable position. The more you define it yourself, the safer you are. You positively affect your labelling by being crystal clear above what your themes are, and what your message is, and how it all fits together – so that it is less likely that Adcom will light on a mistaken or contingent label. The accuracy and differentiating quality of the label you acquire in the admissions office is a reflection of how successful you have been in communicating your message.

Another, bolder technique is to develop a label for yourself that you

like – and slip it into one or more of your essays. You could refer to yourself as 'the Texan Quant' or 'the Melody Maker', and so on. You want something that adds value and is highly sticky – in other words, memorable to the point of being unforgettable.

Mapping your message to the essay questions

You are finished with the profile part of your preparation when you have done your personal and professional brainstorming, have grouped your results, can clearly enunciate the main themes of your profile and can express them together with the essential elements of your past achievements and future goals in a short message.

Throughout this profiling phase of your application, you have not looked at the essay questions. In fact, you have pointedly created your message completely independently of the questions. Now is the moment to examine the question set in your first application. When you do, you will do it firmly in the knowledge that your task is *not* primarily answering the questions, it is communicating your value message via the questions. With your ready message, you are – with a small amount of adaptation – prepared for any questions you may face. When you answer them you will be driven in what you write by the message you want to communicate, not by the questions you are asked. You must, of course, make sure that the questions do get specifically and closely answered too – that's the game. Everyone else has to as well, and admissions committees will be severe with you for waffling off the point. They will either assume you can't think or can't write, or they will think you have boiler-plated your answer from your applications to other schools – or worse, from someone else's application.

Think of each question as an opportunity to showcase part of your profile. So, for each application you make, you will now face one simple task: finding the best fit between a piece of your pre-existing message to Adcom and the questions in front of you – without compromising either your message or the questions. Each application will present a new strategic jigsaw puzzle as you decide where to place each piece of your profile, and how to get all the pieces shoehorned in and knitted together. You will have to do this 'mapping' of message to question set quite differently for each set, but always with the same goal – to transfer your pre-existing message via the questions.

Towards question archetypes

The key to high-quality mapping is knowing what each question seeks – what Adcom expects from your response in each case and what bonus information can legitimately be added. But schools all ask different questions. Or do they?

They appear different, but if you look closely almost every essay question is a variation of the classic questions that business schools typically ask. There are, in fact, only about ten classic question 'archetypes' and practically all questions are an adaptation of one of these archetypes or part of an archetype, or a combination of two or more archetypes.

If you recognize and understand the archetype, you will see the basic MBA essay question which lies behind the obscure one you are posed, and you will more easily be able to determine what answer information is relevant, what is additional and what is superfluous. This will provide a solid basis for deciding which parts of your themed message go with which question, and this will greatly empower you to use the questions as a vehicle for your message. The ten archetypes, and suggested responses to them, are detailed in Section Three.

SECTION THREE
Essay Management

9 The MBA essay question archetypes

Message mapping

In the previous sections, you developed your profile, tabulated your strengths and weaknesses, understood your interests, found your stories and developed your themes. Then you turned these elements into an application positioning and created a clear message to communicate it. You did this completely independently of the essay questions, making sure that your answers would be driven primarily by the message you set out to communicate, not by the questions. You are now ready to talk to the admissions committee.

As described in the section that follows, almost every question you will see is an adaptation of its archetype, or part of the archetype, or a combination of two archetypes. Familiarity with the archetypes allows you to roll back the questions you get to their archetypal form, enabling you to best sort and place your profile within them and to transmit your message through them. Recognizing the archetype tells you what kind of answer is demanded, the kind of topics you can broach through it and what pitfalls to avoid.

The MBA question archetypes

The following ten archetypes are the classic questions in all business school applications (Figure 9.1).

ARCHETYPE 1: 'WHY AN MBA?'

1. Examples[3]

> Briefly assess your career progress to date. Elaborate on your future career plans and your motivation for pursuing a graduate degree at the Kellogg School. (Kellogg)

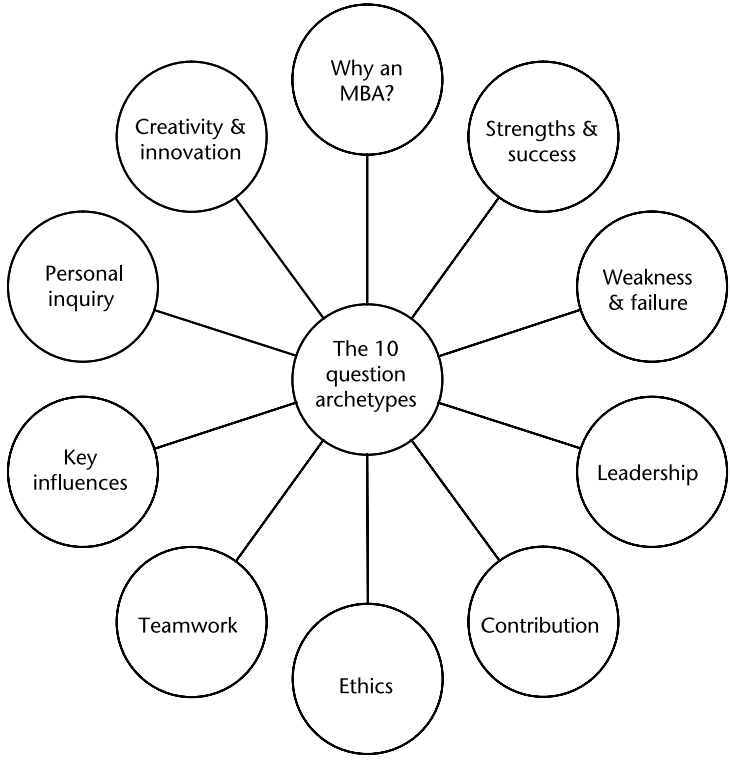

Figure 9.1 The ten MBA essay question archetypes.

Think about the decisions you have made in your life. Describe the following. Past: What choices have you made that led you to your current position? Present: Why is a Stern MBA necessary at this point in your life? Future: What is your desired position upon graduation from the Stern School? (Stern)

Why do you want to do an MBA at the London Business School at this point in your life? What will you do if you are not offered a place on the London Business School MBA or any other MBA? (London)

2. How to recognize this archetype

Keywords: progress, past, present, future, career, goal, plan, aspiration, ambition, decision, position, objective, intention, aim, purpose, life, short term, long term.

3. The underlying issue the committee is asking you to address

Stripped of its verbiage, this question always asks you: Why do you need an MBA, why now and why from us? Your response forms the backbone of your essay set and your whole application.

Note that there are five parts to the question, covering three time periods:

- Past – What experiences have led you to this point and this ambition?
- Present – Why an MBA now, at this point in your career?
- Future – What do you want to do with your degree, in the short and long term?
- Why an MBA from this school particularly?
- Why an MBA at all? (Why not another kind of Masters, or a PhD?)

You should touch on all five topics somewhere in your complete essay set, but be careful to answer this and all questions exactly as posed. If the question is broadly posed, as with Kellogg above, all topics can be addressed in full. Note, however, that Stern does not ask for long-term goals and LBS has a particular sub-question.

In general, shape your 'why an MBA' answer carefully to whether the question asks more about your past ('What has led you to want an MBA?') or about your future ('What will you do when you graduate? How will an MBA help you?').

4. How to tackle it

This essay should be done in a clear and straightforward way. You can be creative in your answers to many other questions but here it is too risky. Here the committee is looking above all for unequivocal evidence of your professional maturity, as shown by your clarity of purpose.

Show due diligence

The 'why an MBA' question is one of the best places to prove you have done your homework on the school, and to argue that there is a specific match between your agenda and what's on offer. Mention the school's features, courses or extramural opportunities and say which are relevant to you and why.

Have definite goals

The admissions committee is looking for an organized career strategy that rests on solid self-understanding. They want to know why you have made the decisions you made, how they have brought you to this point in your life and where you are going from here. Goals can include broader, non-career and

personal or community aspirations – but your first priority is to establish a clear professional path.

Connect past to future

The committee is asking how your past connects to your future via business school. You must show that the MBA is the bridge between you yesterday and you tomorrow. Paint a picture of a future that rests naturally on your past, assuming the MBA from the school in question. Past, present and future can be presented in any order. What works will depend on the details of your situation. A generally versatile template is:

- Start with your direct goal on graduation.
- Then give a sense of your long-term (major) goals.
- Say why an MBA is relevant to these goals, and why now.
- Bolster this with what in your past has led you to this point.
- Finish with the particular aspects of the target school that are relevant and attractive, given your stated goals.

Communicating future aspirations

Dream and be real

You have to walk a fine line here. On the one hand, you must think big. Whether you want to manage a billion dollars, or create new brain technology industries, or fix Africa – whatever it is, you should communicate high aspirations and a potential career worthy of an MBA graduate in twenty years from now. On the other hand, you must demonstrate career-path realism: your dreams will take a lifetime to mature, and even then they may not. You should sound like you understand how careers evolve in your field and the ways you might have to 'do your time' (even if highly paid) before you become a true titan of your industry.

Show first steps

The best don't wait for acceptance of their business school application before getting on with their dreams. You raise your stock immeasurably if you can show you have already taken steps towards the goal you claim to aspire to. Have you done the certifications you need for your career move? Do you have a plan for attracting investors to the business you hope to set up? Convince the committee that you will make it happen no matter what, even if you *don't* get into their school, or any school.

Have a worthwhile future

Faced with applicants who have equivalent grades and Gmats, the admissions committee will promote those who are on a unique, interesting, worthwhile

career mission. You may have to work hard to polish up whatever dullness or omissions lurk in your past, but your aspirations are safely ahead of you where no committee can verify them. So don't hesitate to project yourself into valuable, distinctive roles.

Don't hedge on your aspirations

Applicants sometimes say something like: 'I want to go to Silicon Valley and create a startup using my knowledge of XPF-Bio data mining. If that doesn't work out I may go back to my old job at Bear Stearns, or join the family business.' Adcom prefers to bet on candidates who have a single-minded focus and who will do anything (legal) to realize their dream. If you don't back yourself 100%, the committee won't either.

Differentiate yourself

A common question is: 'Should I include a family and kids in my stated life goals?' The problem in doing this is *not* that you will appear a less serious candidate if you want a family, it is that you will spend precious space talking about a very common goal. You benefit most by focusing your reader on aspirations that set you apart.

5. How to flunk the 'why an MBA' question

You will mess up this essay if:

- You don't answer parts of the question asked, or you answer parts not asked.
- Your style for this essay is flippant or frivolous.
- You fail to talk about the specific attributes of the program you are applying to, and why they are relevant to your education and your future.
- You have aspirations that are too low or too dull, or you are uncertain of them.
- Your career goals don't require an MBA, or the role of an MBA is not clear.
- You have goals that are unrealistic, or you fail to explain a realistic path to them.
- Your goals are illogical or an extreme stretch given your past, suggesting career flakiness. (You're a Kurdish linguist: you want to be a Wall Street analyst.) The committee will ask: 'Is this aspiration logical? Will [he or she] be recruited?'

Mission goals versus functional goals

Most candidates make the mistake of leaving their goals at the level of function – what they seek to *do* on a daily basis, rather than what they seek to achieve. They will say, for example, 'I want to be a commercial real-estate analyst, or an equities trader, or a fund manager.' Or, they may say, 'I want to run my own firm' or 'I want to manage a multinational company.' This is okay for a start, but you should seek to move rapidly past *function* and onto *mission*. A mission is something you want to achieve via the successful exercise of various functions – for example, commercializing your biomass energy company and taking it public, or turning Reykjavik into a free port, or creating a beauty-parlour empire in Indiana.

A function is what you do every day. A mission is what it all adds up to. It is true that many rich and successful MBAs are primarily well-paid functionaries: bankers or consultants or other kinds of highly paid managers their whole lives. You may well become that too. But this is not the way to get the attention of the admissions committee. To get into business school, you should shape your functional aspirations in terms of a mission. Function is general, mission is specific and concrete and therefore more distinctive, more valuable. Whatever your intended function is, it is likely to be shared by many applicants. Your mission will tell the committee something unique and resonant about you. It will suggest your passion and your dream.

Your mission goal is a second admissions ticket

Creating a career mission that is interesting, viable and worthwhile is like buying another lottery ticket in the admissions sweepstakes. If you are borderline and might not have been accepted on your merits as a candidate, you might sneak in on the merits of your worthwhile goal. Adcom is not in the business of discriminating between different candidate missions. But given a choice between two equal candidates, one of whom has a clear and supportable mission and the other who has merely determined his career function, Adcom will support the mission. It is very hard to turn down a candidate who is hoping to do something interesting and valuable in the world. It is easier to reject the candidate who will be just one more consultant or banker, or private equity analyst in the world.

The career arc

Your post-MBA career, if it all works out as planned, will look something like a rocket launched into sub-orbit. You will shoot very quickly upwards, then you will progress more slowly and perhaps in less of a straight line to your highest point, after which you will begin your decent into quasi- and eventually full

retirement. There are broadly three phases: the climb, the peak and the dénouement. Very often in the last phase, successful career-minded MBAs go in a new (but related) direction and turn more attention to community and philanthropy. They start consulting firms or turn their lifelong hobbies into businesses.

Women, but increasingly men as well, may take time out for parenthood along the way, but the shape of this broad life and career arc will still apply. You should be able to say how this arc applies to you, how the sections will fit together and what broad themes will go with you all the way through your personal and professional life.

ARCHETYPE 2: STRENGTHS, SUCCESS AND ACHIEVEMENT

1. Examples

Describe what you believe to be your two most substantial accomplishments to date (at least one must be professional), explaining why you view them as such. (Insead)

What is your definition of success? Describe the strategies you have employed in striving for success in your life. (Cornell)

What do you consider to be your single most important achievement and why? (IMD)

2. Recognition keywords

Overcome, success, achievement, attainment, feat, triumph, milestone, prevail, accomplishment.

3. The underlying issue

Part of this question is straightforward – it asks for your main personal and professional achievements, to see if you are a success-driven, achievement-oriented candidate, and what concrete things you have done in a competitive company that prove this.

In every MBA application pool there will be real outstanding success stories – Olympic athletes, Grammy winners, and so on – and these candidates definitely get credit for high-profile achievement. It doesn't hurt the image of the school at all either. But, take heart.

Three things work in favour of more ordinary mortals. First, applicants are not ranked primarily on past successes. They are ranked on likelihood of future success. Second, not all accomplishments must belong out there in the hurly-burly of life. Sometimes the biggest and most meaningful accomplishments

can be small hurdles that, for one good reason or another, were big for you, or show a big heart. Any achievement counts, as long as it is genuinely impressive in some way and was achieved in a competitive setting. Third, and most important, whether the achievement is big or small, what it amounted to exactly is less important to the committee than why you value it and *what it says about you*.

Therefore, almost any achievement will work as well as any other, provided you can say: why it was meaningful (beyond the fact that it's nice to win and prove yourself); why you set the achievement as a goal in your life in the first place; why you still savour the achievement now; why it makes you proud; how it served to build you; why you choose to talk about it in your essay now, over and above any other achievement; and how this suggests the kind of successes you are likely to pursue in the future. In other words, whatever the achievement was or wasn't in objective terms, the real test of the essay is that you can extract the personal and growth implications from it and use it as a vehicle for telling your personal story. It's not only about what you've done. It's about who you are.

4. How to tackle it

There are, therefore, two parts to this essay. Part 1 is the narrative story of the success, including the circumstances and build-up that surrounded it. Part 2 is the analysis of the success. You should think in terms of using no more that 50% of your allotted word length to tell the story. Remember, the success itself does not count for everything, so spend the bulk of your time on your analysis: why the achievement is significant to you and what this suggests about who you are and the kind of things you intend to focus your talent on once you have MBA skills and credentials.

Choosing achievements

Accomplishments imply attributes and strengths – the skills that allowed you to beat the competition or overcome a significant difficulty. Ideally, the accomplishment you choose should be one that implies your command of the strengths valued by MBA programs, including maturity, leadership, teamwork, strong personality, creativity and perseverance (see Chapter 2 for the twenty-two attributes that admissions committees are looking for). If who you are is more important than what you've done, you also don't necessarily have to pick the most overtly impressive thing you ever did. Instead, you can consider your past more broadly, and choose an achievement that is intrinsic to your themes that allows you to reinforce your key message and clarify the basic premises of your argument. As a general rule, if asked for more than one success, give one from your professional life and one from your personal life.

In talking of the attributes that underpin the success you mention, this essay is a good place to show you are a 'finisher' – someone who will overcome no matter what the obstacles. Generally, all worthwhile achievements imply a large amount of tenacity. Make sure you extract the presence of such strengths from your story.

Writing about your successes raises the questions: How modest should you be? Should you be understated or trumpet yourself? Careful attention to tone and to cultural norms is required here. It's common cause that Americans are more receptive to forthright self-promotion than the British and Europeans. In applying to competitive programs, you should be prepared to outspokenly showcase yourself. Being modest won't get you anywhere, and certainly less so in the US than anywhere else. The best rule to follow is: be very forthright in claiming personal merit where you have a concrete award, promotion or other independent proof of your achievement. Go easy on unproven, subjective positive self-regard.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You choose a weak or boring accomplishment.
- You spend too long on the accomplishment story and not enough on the analysis.
- You duck or flub the analysis: you can't say why the achievement means something to you, or what it means.
- You don't give clear insight into the attributes and qualities that underpin the achievement.
- Your story is short on detail.
- You are over-modest about your achievement, or you are insufferably arrogant (both suggest immaturity).

Compete on the analysis

This suggested essay solution introduces the valuable, classic two-part MBA essay answer format – one where you provide factual and/or story data (input) in the early part of the essay and an interpretive analysis (output) in the later part. The essay goes from grabbing, captivating and informing, to synthesizing, interpreting and convincing. The descriptive part takes the reader into the details of your experiences; the analytical part takes the reader to your learning and insight.

Stories are more or less equal but analysis is not. It might be hard to swallow at first, but the reality is that the story data from most candidates is of equal type and merit. Your great wins and unique experiences – travel to Tibet,

loss of a grandparent, a bad boss, winning a race – might feel very unique to you, but they will be very similar in form and substance to everyone else's. Scores will be similar, the work experience and life path will be similar or of roughly equal value, and so on. In other words, it is unlikely that your experiences are better than anyone else's and, even if they are, it will be difficult to prove. However, candidates' expertise at, and commitment to, interpretive self-analysis varies hugely, as does their communications ability. Here is where you can differentiate yourself. The obvious implication is that you should compete on the analysis, where there is leverage and where most candidates are weak. Start by getting clarity on what analysis you want to extract, and work backwards from there. Decide what points you want to make about yourself and pick a story that will best facilitate those points, and get the story told quickly enough so you have sufficient space to turn the story into an argument for your admission.

ARCHETYPE 3: WEAKNESSES AND FAILURE

1. Examples

Describe a failure or setback in your life. How did you overcome this setback? What, if anything, would you do differently if confronted with this situation again? (Michigan)

Describe a situation taken from school, business, civil or military life, where you did not meet your personal objectives, and discuss briefly the effect. (Insead)

'Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself'. – Leo Tolstoy. What was the most difficult constructive feedback you have received, and what did you do as a result of it? (Stern)

2. Recognition keywords

Failure, weakness, learning, unsuccessful, fall short, fault, flaw, limitation, inadequate, criticism, shortcoming, adversity, go wrong, efforts come to nothing, weak spot, imperfection, deficiency.

3. The underlying issue

This essay is your greatest opportunity to separate yourself from the crowd because it is the one most candidates find the hardest, and it is often the one done most poorly. First, understand that the committee is uninterested in your mistake *per se*. What they are testing, above all, is your maturity and your ability

to learn from it. The committee wants to know if you can face your own flaws and discuss them candidly and work on them, or if you will try to hide them and/or blame circumstances or other people. This is a significant test of your readiness for senior leadership.

No-one is comfortable talking about their weak spots and failures. Nobody – not me, not you, not the admissions officer – is perfect or has not failed. The greatest managers and leaders have all made significant mistakes in business and their lives. The point is not to prove that you don't fail, or won't fail. It is to prove that you have the insight into yourself and the personal resources to come back from failure when it occurs. What the admissions committee wants to know is not how you avoided failure, but how you managed it, what you learned, what insight into yourself you gained and how you grew from there. They want to see that you have the will and the insight to locate and understand the source of your mess-up – the underlying weaknesses that caused it – and that you have the maturity to face and address those problems.

If it helps you to be candid, remember also that failure is okay (particularly in the American business ethos). Nothing else teaches you quite like failing does, and a life of failure-avoidance is often a life of experience-avoidance. In many ways, it is the path to future success. Failure is often a result of the qualities Adcom is looking for – bold plans, ambition, initiative, creativity and a willingness to take risks. The committee (and your future bosses, partners and employees) will generally forgive the mistakes you make, if you are big enough to take responsibility and if you learn rapidly from them.

Crucially, admitting weakness and failure allows you to showcase how hard you work on improving yourself, which is a key characteristic of a good leader. So go ahead and own up to the mess-up. Own up to the underlying weakness, if applicable. Talk about how you propose to correct the weakness, then be positive and move on. Show your growth and your continued can-do spirit.

Choosing failure topics

The first thing to be clear on is what 'a failure' is. A failure is a situation where there were operational objectives and/or responsibilities and/or aspirations on your shoulders, which for reasons to do with your own actions or omissions turned out poorly. A failure must point to weaknesses of your approach, understanding, judgement, aptitude, execution or character. A failure could be missing a deadline, breaking someone's trust, underperforming when others are counting on you, misjudging a situation or a person, and so on.

In addition, the best kinds of failures for MBA admissions purposes are:

- One where you were faced with more or less the same set of circumstances a second time. In this you can show how the lesson was learned, not just claim that it has been.

- A failure with an implied weakness for which the MBA curriculum, learning, experience or socialization is part of the proposed solution. Then admission becomes the first step on the road to overcoming your weakness or lack of experience.
- A failure that allows you to develop one or all of your themes and reinforce your message. (Your scrambled recovery from failure, or your learning and working on a weakness, can lead into a discussion of one of the themes of your application message.)

Failure topics to avoid

Non-failures

The fact that you have some culpability for a mess-up does not mean it is a personal failure. A failure must be the result of a weakness. Therefore, getting caught doing a prank or any other high-spirited loss of control is hardly ever a failure – the time you got drunk with your buddies and the cops stopped you and someone had to bail you out of jail at three in the morning is not a failure. It is just youthful exuberance.

Similarly, anything that is mostly bad luck or mostly an accident is hardly ever a failure – crashing your car, getting your girlfriend pregnant or any other event that goes wrong, even if you have some culpability for it, is not a failure (or is only failure to plan or take precautions). If you pick an accidental failure, you will not be able to talk about a weakness underlying it or a personal fix you have put in place.

Fake failures

Don't be so naïve as to think you can slip a fake failure or phony weakness past the admissions committee. Don't say you failed to do something but in the end nobody found out so no harm was done. Your failure must be an episode where there was egg on your face, either at the time or some time afterwards, because part of the story is how you fixed the situation and dealt with the egg. And don't ever, ever, ever say 'my weakness is that I have no weaknesses'. If you choose a trite or non-failure, you will fail this essay on maturity grounds.

Inappropriate failures

Don't present a childhood failure – it's an obvious cop-out. Unless there is a very good reason to go back further, your failure should be something that happened to you after the age of 21 – that is, when you were a full adult and cannot hide behind natural age immaturity.

Don't pick an ethical or moral failure. The reader should get a sense of a mess-up, but she should not be scandalized. If you stole, lied or cheated once, the admissions officer will think you might do it again. Moral failings are too hard to shake. If you want to confess, go to confession.

Don't suggest any failure related to mental health. In an ideal future, mental illness will be better understood, but we are not there yet. Any mental illness – even something as apparently innocuous as attention deficit disorder – will hang like a wet cloud over your application. Neurosis, depression or anything else like it will finish you off, no matter how much you claim to have beaten it.

Don't pick a failure that takes you into territory that normally stays behind closed doors. If you conquered impotence, for example, MBA admissions is not the place to talk about it. Stay clear of topics where the very fact of broaching them may suggest social ineptness on your part.

Adversity

Depending on how the question is phrased, the term 'adversity' could very well be a euphemism for failure or it could just be referring to adverse conditions. Either way, the key to responding to the adversity question – in addition to tackling it as a failure question using the guidance above – is to recognize it as a test of character and ingenuity. As many dot-com hotshots found out, it's easy to be a good businessman in good times, but when the weather turns, that's when your mettle and your creativity are tested. True leaders show their stuff when the odds are against them. If you can demonstrate to the committee that you have proved mettle in this way, your application will get a significant boost.

4. How to tackle it

This essay is similar in form to the achievement essay, discussed above, in that you have an event story followed by analysis. However, in this case the story typically has two parts – your failure event and your scramble to put things right. The analysis will also have two parts: the first analysing the reason for failure and the weakness present that caused it; and the second extracting the lesson and considering how you would manage the situation differently if you were faced with it again (or better still, how you actually did manage a similar situation more successfully the next time).

The standard template for this essay is thus:

1a. Story – failure
1b. Story – damage control
2a. Analysis – understanding of your mistakes and shortcomings
2b. Analysis – learning, growth, fix, situation revisit.

Start with the story. Don't dress it up or make it pretty – tell it like it was – how you were responsible for a big red-faced mess-up. Talk about it honestly and don't duck it. Stand up, in the way a mature person would. Remember to

pay attention to the gritty painful details – they make your story immediate and interesting: don't say you caused the company to lose 'a lot of money', say you 'cost them $250,000'. Don't say you were 'underdressed for the client meeting'; take us to the moment on the Saturday when you showed up in a T-shirt because you misread the memo, and your boss froze you out. Make the admissions officer wriggle in his seat with embarrassment for you. (For more on using details in your writing, see Section Four.)

Again, your story – parts 1a and 1b – should not be longer than 50% of your essay. If there is something significant to say about 1b – that is, if your damage control was bold, ingenious or somehow shows management talent in itself – you can allow yourself a little more length.

Your analysis should deal with such issues as why you present this failure rather than others, why it was a meaningful and valuable lesson, and why it sheds light on you as a person and on your growth path. You should show your insight into the reasons behind the failure, what you've learned and how you've grown and got smarter. Show how you have addressed a deficiency, providing evidence of real self-work, or how you have learned to manage the shortcomings implied. Ultimately, the analysis should recast your failure event as a 'learning experience' that has strengthened you personally and professionally and is fundamental to building you into the top leader you are in the process of becoming. That is, you reframe the liability of a failure as the asset of experience.

From failure to success

However the failure essay question is posed, you must deal with it as a story about overcoming failure and adversity and the lessons you learned. Tell a solution story not a hard luck story. Being pathetic might get you sympathy, but it won't get you admitted. Just because you've had a hard life, or something sad or horrible or unlucky has happened to you, does not mean that you deserve a place. As explained in Chapter 2, you will get in for one reason only: because you add more short- and long-term value to the school than the next person. What matters is how potentially bright your future is, not what luck you may or may not have had in the past. It is therefore important to be fully past the failure experience when you tell Adcom about it, so you can look back and extract the lessons from a position of relative comfort, with all the lessons fully understood and digested. You don't want to talk about a present, lingering failure that you haven't sorted out yet. A failure story must become a story of your learning and overcoming, so move past the problem to the solution.

On the other hand, a common problem applicants have is they insinuate that the failure and weaknesses behind it are absolutely thoroughly beaten. 'I messed up – I understand why – I learned from it – that won't happen again.'

The truth is that some of your weak spots will probably stay with you throughout your life in one form or another. If they are genuine, there is – by definition – no easy way to beat them, and you will fail again because of them, and it's juvenile to think otherwise. The only thing that improves is your management of your weaknesses. Take heart from the reality that most CEOs, presidents and other celebrities – from Bill Gates to Bill Clinton – are managing a chronic imperfection or two. It is fine to tell Adcom that you recognize a long-term weakness, and explain how you compensate for it, while always watching vigilantly for where it might still lead you to make wrong moves.

Tone

When you are writing about failure, take care to keep a straightforward, candid, objective tone. Don't try to slip in softening or deflecting phrases. Don't hide behind humour. Don't come across as excusing or blaming. Don't whine. (If you're really struggling with this, get your spouse or significant other to write the first draft of this essay – they will give a forthright account of your weaknesses in the kind of tone you are looking for!)

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You cannot candidly admit failure and weakness.
- Your failure event is weak, or it is a non-failure, or you do not demonstrate that you understand what constitutes a failure.
- Your story is short on detail and interest.
- You don't connect failure to weaknesses, or you imply that your weaknesses are trivial.
- Your tone is inappropriate or juvenile.
- There is too much description and not enough analysis.
- You fail to develop or share insight into yourself.
- You underestimate the transformation required to ensure not failing next time given the same circumstances. You think that your weak spots are solved rather than managed.

ARCHETYPE 4: LEADERSHIP

1. Examples

Describe a significant leadership experience, decision-making challenge or accomplishment. How did this experience affect your professional and personal development? (Darden)

Please give an example of when you had an impact on a person, group or organization. Please describe the situation, your actions, and the results. (Sloan)

Please cite and explain a specific situation in which you demonstrated initiative. (Columbia)

2. Recognition keywords

Lead, motivate, initiative, impact, leadership, guide, direct, direction, responsibility, decision, inspire, encourage, power, influence, run, organize.

3. The underlying issue

Leadership will be a guiding theme in every application you do. Adcom asks this question to find out not only what kind of leader you are now and what kind of a leader you might become – whether you've got 'the right stuff' – but also to determine your understanding of, and attitude to, leadership.

Part of having the right stuff is knowing what the right stuff looks like. Just having leadership experience doesn't necessarily mean you were any good at it. You have to show them you know what good is. You must also demonstrate an explicit understanding of your particular personal leadership style – how you influence, how you motivate, how you sanction, and so on – and the preferences and assumptions behind your leadership style. Note that, for MBA admissions purposes, you won't get far with the idea that being an associate member of nice-sounding organizations is 'leadership'. If you weren't present and active in the centre of events, it doesn't count. One active leadership experience is worth a dozen organization affiliations.

In some cases, there may be an overlap between this essay and the achievement essay – a leadership event may also be one of your great achievements. But there are crucial differences. First, a leadership event need not be a success. You may present a leadership event where you didn't succeed, if you at least learned a lot about yourself and about leading. Second, while achievement is often the product of personal goals and private struggles, leadership is *always* in the public domain. If nobody other than you is involved, it is not a leadership event. This 'public domain' criterion of leadership requires you to pick an event where you created, directed and influenced an outcome that was achievable by two or more people, of which you were a part, and where your abilities made a difference to others' ability to achieve a goal.

The ability to make a difference by motivating, harnessing and coordinating the efforts of others is the very essence of leadership for MBA admissions purposes. Therefore, what's also important here is your relationship with other people and your understanding of their motivations and the team dynamics.

The interpersonal dimension suggests that your leadership essay will potentially overlap with the team essay. In the team leader role, you need to show a sophisticated understanding of the leadership problems inherent in managing multiple egos and orchestrating group priorities. In all leadership analysis, you should show respect for the difficulties of leadership – if you underestimate how hard it is, you have never really led.

4. How to tackle it

The question usually requires the description-analysis format, as discussed above. Once again you should not overspend your allotted word length on telling the story. Remember, unless you have led in some spectacular capacity (you are already Eritrea's Minister of Foreign Affairs, say), the merit of your leadership story is going to resemble everyone else's, so focus on your analysis, where you can differentiate yourself. Again, for the same reason, it is less important to pick the most impressive leadership event of your life than one that allows you to develop one or all of your themes.

In your analysis, you must explain why the leadership event you chose was, and continues to be, valuable as a leadership experience, what this suggests about how you view leadership and what that says about you as a future leader. Show how your leadership and other experiences to date are defining your emerging leadership style. You should, space permitting, share some of your 'theory' of leadership so far – what leadership is and how best to do it.

Remember that if you are MBA-entry age, you are at the stage of life where, no matter how good your leadership skills are, they are still being formed. Most of your leading experience is still in front of you. This makes it appropriate for you to present your leadership skills as a work in progress (and in need of MBA training). In your attempt to outgun the competition, try not to fall into the trap of claiming you are a seasoned leader with rafts of senior experience. You will just destroy your credibility.

Leadership versus ethical dilemmas

Some people think that taking a moral stand – for example, reporting your boss for inflating monthly sales figures – is a leadership event. It is not. It is just an ethical event. Very occasionally, a leadership essay overlaps with the 'ethical dilemma' essay (see Archetype 6, below) in that resolving the dilemma requires leadership. For example, there may have been broader organizational dynamics involved in resolving the issues of the inflated monthly sales figures, and you may have challenged, motivated and led people to see things your way and follow you in taking action. In other words, the ethical event becomes a leadership event only to the extent that you influence a group's action.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- Your leadership event is weak, suggesting you don't have any significant leadership experience.
- You mix up leadership events with achievement events or ethical dilemmas.
- Your story is short on detail, interest and relevance.
- You hype the amount and extent of your leadership experience.
- Your analysis is vacuous and does not provide insight into you or your leadership attributes.
- You do not show understanding of your own leadership style.
- You fail to develop or share your insights into the nature of leadership.

ARCHETYPE 5: CONTRIBUTION

1. Examples

> Each of our applicants is unique. Describe how your background, values, academics, activities and/or leadership skills will enhance the experiences of other Kellogg students. (Kellogg)
>
> Fuqua's culture values the individual contributions that each student brings to the community. What qualities and life experiences will you bring to Fuqua, and how will they enable you to contribute? (Fuqua)

2. Recognition keywords

Contribution, cross-cultural, diversity, experience, knowledge, range, skill, enrich, talent, expertise, proficiency, distinctive, attributes, variety, augment, enhance, develop, expand, improve, increase, unique.

3. The underlying issue

Like the 'why an MBA' question, this is a question that is asked every time in one form or another – and if it isn't you should fit the answer into one of your other essays anyway. The committee wants to know what in your background, ability, experience or training sets you apart and will be uniquely valuable to your cohort and the program in general. Remember, it is a big part of the admissions committee's job to make sure the incoming class is stuffed (and balanced) with diverse, interesting, uniquely talented people.

Schools seek diversity because much of MBA learning is peer to peer, and candidates with diverse and extraordinary experience have more to give to their peers.

Various other essays are designed to see if you fit the MBA mould. The test of this essay is whether you can separate yourself from the crowd and get away from being the typical candidate. This one is the talent show. You don't have to be better than anyone else in the show, but you do have to enter with a special skill, talent or experience that is exclusive. You have to find something in your profile that sets you apart. Among the kinds of things that people talk about in the context of their diversity contribution are:

- International experience: growing up abroad, or significant travel or foreign work experience and languages.
- Unique work experience, or experience in unique industries, including benefiting from unusual training.
- Being a member of a minority group: being black, American Indian, or being disabled, gay, or otherwise non-mainstream.
- Special abilities and talents: being an occasional baritone with the Austrian National Opera, for example.
- Having benefited from a special or unique vantage point on the world – being on Kofi Annan's staff, for example, or having worked in promotions for the Brazilian national soccer team.

These are just example categories. There are almost no rules for what you can bring to the talent contest – only you can know what you are that nobody else is. Often your extramural activities will point the way to your unique attributes.

Example

The following is one way of discovering your unique contribution. Imagine you are accepted to your dream school. On your first day there you bump into the head of the admissions who knows exactly who you are, and she says: 'From the moment we realized that you would bring _____ (background, experience, talent, other addition) to the school this year, wow, you were in!' Fill in the blank. If nothing jumps out at you, consider that your unique attribute may be in the combination of elements that are otherwise unremarkable. Perhaps you are a Palestinian partner in an Israeli-funded IT start-up. Maybe you are a currency trader who sings opera at the London Proms every summer. Is there some *combination* of factors that will make you unique and memorable?

It's nice to underscore your uniqueness with a certain level of achievement, but achievement is not the primary consideration here. If you merely trained to swim the English Channel, or were a teen counsellor in a

Japanese orphanage, or grew up on Hollywood movie sets, or spent a month in an ashram in silent meditation, this could be enough. There are plenty of times in an MBA application where competitive achievement counts, but here the bias is towards the experience itself – as long as you can show why the experience adds to the tapestry of interdependent learning of business school life.

On standing out

Applicants are often so desperate to make the 'right' impression that they fear doing anything that would make themselves stand out, and scrub anything from their file that smacks of difference. Don't be scared to be different and be yourself and to make the admissions officer think: 'Huh!! I've got to meet this one.' Unusual people with interesting pasts get in because they make the class more fun and enriching for all.

On the other hand, business school is a serious place and there are limits to how eccentrically you can play your hand. These limits largely depend on what the rest of your file looks like and where you are applying to. If you are a banking lifer at 28, you have to do something – anything – to make a colourful splash in your essays. But if you're the guy on Venice Beach who made an unofficial fortune renting kite-boards and selling joints, you should run an altogether more conservative application.

4. How to tackle it

This essay is one where candidates are highly susceptible to the tendency to throw everything at the committee in the hope that something sticks. Try not to do this. It's fine to sketch out the spread of your interests – then pick one or one cluster.

The standard template for this essay is:

a. Claiming an interesting and unique aspect, or combination of aspects.
b. Proving that you have it/them.
c. Showing why it is relevant and beneficial to the group and the school.
d. Showing what else it says about you and making links to your themes.

The burden of proof is generally quite light in an MBA essay, but it is there. If you claim you danced in the Hong Kong Youth Ballet, for example, the committee would expect (and be interested in) some details. If you have been to the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Research Station, some first-hand experience account would be called for.

This essay doesn't always call directly for a story, but you should write one if you can, to bring your unique element to life. In fact, one of the tests of whether your uniqueness is valuable and enriching to others is whether you can immediately think of some interesting or enlightening stories to tell about it. As you move from story to analysis, you must show why the unique attribute you offer the school sheds light on you as a person and your potential to succeed at school and in life.

The relevance and benefit of your exclusive contribution to the class must be spelled out clearly. It may be evident to you that being physically disabled or French-speaking or the stepdaughter of Robert de Niro makes you different and valuable – but the test is whether you can convince the committee this is valuable to the learning experience of your classmates and/or to the faculty. Also, be as specific as you can. You can limply say that your Communist Romanian childhood gives you insight into 'economic, social and cultural differences', or you can point out how your many summers at socialist teenage camps will allow you to offer some genuine insight into European labour politics in your human resources elective.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You fail to differentiate yourself – your exclusive offering is something others offer too.
- Your diversity attributes and experiences are trivial or not apparently relevant to the business school environment.
- You do not focus your contribution. You give Adcom too much disparate information and make them guess.
- You play it too safe. You profile doesn't have a memorable angle.
- Your proposed contribution is not valuable to your peers or the school, or you fail to explain how it is valuable or to whom.
- You fail to connect your unique attribute(s) and the circumstances of their acquisition to the rest of your file. You don't use them to enlighten the reader about you.

ARCHETYPE *6*: ETHICS AND VALUES

1. Examples

Discuss an ethical dilemma that you experienced firsthand. How did you manage and resolve the situation? (Harvard)

Many organizations have a credo/value statement that they follow. Please share with us your personal credo. (Cornell)

Drawing on current events, discuss the relevance of market forces and government regulation on corporate values. Stake out your position on this issue and support your argument with specific details and examples. (Yale)

2. Recognition keywords

Morals, ethics, values, principles, standards, ideals, code of conduct, credo, beliefs, philosophy, personal guidelines.

3. The underlying issue

Famously, values are back. Suddenly, after Enron, Anderson and various other serious breaches of public faith, business is clamouring to show its good side. Therefore, MBA programs follow suit, and so should you.

The tricky thing about this essay is that everyone knows what good values are and everyone claims ownership of them. And yet the world is full of scheming, self-serving scoundrels in both large and small enterprises. The known public scandals are the top snowflakes on the tip of the iceberg. So, writing a nice essay that shakes its head at known elements of business and personal immorality – stealing, cheating, falsifications, pay-offs, etc. – while professing adherence to fair play, good governance, honest dealings and hard-working self-reliance, is perfectly worthless. Talk is cheap. And it certainly won't separate you from the crowd in this essay. One or all of four things will impress, however:

- Demonstrating some thinking towards your own, unique set of values. Which bits of the value galaxy are your guiding lights and why, and how did you come to this position?
- Showing how your commitment to your values – however you define them – is unwavering in the face of temptation, persuasion or overwhelming self-interest.
- Showing an advanced sensitivity to ethical concerns in areas where others might not see them; for example, how you pushed for the cleaning ladies to be allowed to put their kids in the swanky new daycare centre for professional parents at your workplace.
- Providing evidence as to what you have done that serves people other than yourself: evidence that you have volunteered, mentored or contributed to worthy causes.

Ethical challenges versus ethical dilemmas versus non-ethical dilemmas

The definition of ethics – for the purpose of MBA applications – is less complicated than it seems: it's about doing the right thing even when no-one is

looking. But bear in mind the difference between a challenge and a dilemma. An ethical *challenge* is something like the time colleagues asked you to withhold information from a partner or client; or the time when you discovered the production manager double-invoicing; or when you found out that your boss was spending company money on call girls. These are ethical challenges not ethical *dilemmas* because the lack of ethics is clear and all that remains is the challenge of how best to act on your ethics (most often, how to manage the potential career fall-out that might come after you blow the whistle).

Equivalently, the ethical part of an ethical dilemma implies that the dilemma is more than just a difficult decision: if you have an agonizing choice between staying at work late to finish a project and going on a hot date, it is just an ordinary, non-ethical dilemma. An ethical dilemma, therefore, is where ethical issues are at stake and no clear right or wrong answer exists. As with the euthanasia dilemma or the abortion dilemma, an ethical dilemma will be one where there will be strong arguments on both sides and both choices are bitter-sweet.

Ethical dilemmas in the workplace may, for example, take the form of having to fire someone who is underperforming but who is also a sole breadwinner. Or having to decide whether to use knowledge gained in confidence in a salary negotiation. Or having to decide how much of your work to share with colleagues – benefiting the client but diluting your claim to promotion. The decisions you make in these grey areas speak volumes about your character, morality and values. Draw out the implications for the admissions committee. There's a chance that the committee is not going to enforce the distinction between challenge and dilemma, but it's better that you are aware of it.

Not being the snitch

Many ethical dilemma essays are of the following type: 'Something happened at work that raised my ethical concerns, and I resolved the situation by blowing the whistle.' That can work. But if the dilemma was not significant and you still made a royal fuss, you could come across as whining, narrow-minded or stubborn, and put a question mark against your team spirit and loyalty. Don't assume that your personal moral scale is or should be the workplace standard. Be ready for and respectful of cultural and personal differences. You will routinely be faced with differences of opinion and adherence to ethics among the diverse set of people you work with. In almost all circumstances your maturity will be shown in your flexibility, humour and good public relations in the face of such differences.

4. How to tackle it

This essay also calls for a story followed by analysis. Once again, the admissions committee is sure to be less interested in the dilemma itself than in the way you handled it, and the inferences you draw out about yourself.

The essential pieces of the essay are:

a. Telling the story.
b. Processing the dilemma and decision.
c. Developing the learning and insight.
d. Thoughts on your ethical framework.

Move quickly through the story while providing enough detail for the event to be sharp and interesting. Don't forget to say something about the history or the organizational pressures and responsibilities that led up to the event and made the dilemma juicy. Then process your understanding of the dilemma, the choices you had and the merits of going one way or the other. Say why you did what you did and whether it worked out, and if it didn't how you might tackle the same situation now.

As always, the question is not ultimately about ethics, it is about you. Provide some evidence that the situation has led you to self-examination: why this dilemma was meaningful to you, what in your make-up makes your stand on this particular issue important, what experiences in your personal or professional past might have created the basis for this stand and what experiences bear out your holding firm on this issue. Why was the dilemma valuable as a growth experience? Why is your response instructive in shedding light on you as a person and how you might act in the future?

The basis of your ethics

As you do this you should, depending on the question, outline the formal basis of your ethical framework if you have one. What are the principles you live by? What would you stand up for, no matter what the consequences? What is the core of your personal code that influences the way you see your choices at work and in life? What might this mean for you as a future manager? For example, you may be an out-and-out meritocrat: you believe in everyone getting a fair start in life, and then each to his own. Or you may be a hard-core environmentalist, and you put the planet first no matter what (and this is why you reported your ex-company's fouling of virgin forest in Argentina to the authorities).

Finally, it's okay to be young and idealistic in this question: the committee expects it. But while taking the hardest line on moral failings may sound good, it can also sound like you haven't lived in the real world much. Business is not

a Sunday school picnic. Don't be facile. Don't underestimate the difficulty of being ethical, particularly under competitive conditions where big promotions, adoration, fame and fortune come to those who win. Rather than claim to be a saint, say that you are human but you have a commitment to certain key beliefs.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- Your challenge or dilemma event is weak.
- You mix up ethical dilemmas with other types of dilemmas.
- You claim to be ethical, but provide no evidence of your values in action.
- Your self-analysis is insufficient or not self-illuminating. You fail to develop or share insight into yourself or your guiding moral principles.
- You don't demonstrate growth towards the development of your own set of values.
- You appear as the company gossip.
- You underestimate the difficulties of being ethical.

ARCHETYPE 7: TEAMWORK

1. Examples

Tell us about the most challenging team experience you've had to date. What role did you play? What factors made it a challenge for you? How did the group address these issues? (Fuqua)

Describe an experience in which the relationships you developed enhanced the outcome of a team effort. (Columbia)

What does 'community' mean to you? How do you currently contribute to your community and how would you contribute to the Johnson School community? (Johnson)

2. Recognition keywords

Team, group, relationship, collaborate, work together, member, partnership, cooperate, association, affiliation.

3. The underlying issue

The teamwork essay is about the way you interact with other people and manage yourself in groups. No matter what you do in your future business career,

you will do it largely in groups. Your team skills are therefore highly relevant to your future success. They are also relevant to your ability to function at school, as most schools require intensive team projects and even team exams. Like your quantitative skills and your English skills, your team skills have to be good *on entry* to business school.

The challenge of the team essay resembles that of the ethics essay, in that everyone claims to be 'a team player', but there are many who are quite clearly not. Therefore, the attention of the committee is once again on the evidence. Do you have solid experience doing serious projects collaboratively? Can you show a sophisticated understanding of group processes? Does your record show your ability to master them? What evidence shows you can promote group goodwill, balance competing priorities, foster multi-stakeholder solutions and integrate your preferences and skill-sets with those of others in sorting out tasks and timelines? Or are you just another Joe who has learned to mouth the right touchy-feely phrases?

The team essay also overlaps with the leadership essay in that both involve your relationship with groups. But where the leadership essay stresses your ability to motivate or enhance the contributions of others, the team essay is primarily looking for the complementary set of team skills: respecting differences, fostering goodwill, deflecting conflict, tolerating, accommodating and compromising. In this essay, it is not a crime to show that you know when to ease off and let someone else lead while you play a support role, particularly in a field where you are a non-expert.

4. How to tackle it

Choosing a teamwork experience story seems simple enough, but take care with it. It will work better to have a story where team synergies applied – where the team worked to be more than the sum of its parts – and you can elaborate on the processes that created this happy outcome. As ever, don't overlook the opportunity to pick stories that reinforce your themes. If you are positioning yourself as a future Asian private equity dealmaker, don't pick a team story from your Rutgers college dorm. Pick one from your Ernst & Young days in Taiwan. Then show how teamwork leads to self-insight: why the team experience you mention is indicative of you, why it demonstrates your skills, how it illuminates you as a person and what it suggests about you as a team member in future situations. If your story was a watershed event in your approach to teamwork, say why. Show also that you appreciate how tough a taskmaster real teamwork actually is – how extraordinarily difficult it is to get teams to be functional and productive, and how much you still have to learn about doing this.

Your analysis must also include an understanding of your own role in teams. Teams need a balance of different types – evaluators, drivers, facilitators,

conflict managers, detail freaks, etc. – so there are no rights and wrongs to being any one. But you must be able to say which role you normally play in groups and what your style of intra-team interaction is. A detailed appreciation of your team-player profile will take you beyond the forbidden banality that applicants come up with all the time in this essay: 'I'm a good team player.'

Exercise

If you are unclear what your team profile is, do some elementary behavioural testing. You may, for example, take the Belbin assessment, which specifically analyses role profiles, or any one of the more general personality assessments such as the Myers Briggs, Neo 5-factor or Omni, among a host of others. You don't need to make any life choices based on these instruments, but they should give you significant material to chew on in this essay. If you can say, 'According to my Belbin team profile I am a "monitor-evaluator" and this has the following implications for how I work in teams . . .,' your team essay will contain specific, topical, unusual information about you and will therefore be a better essay.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You don't show significant team experience.
- You appear to lack genuine teamwork instincts or you don't understand what they are.
- Your teamwork story lacks detail and interest, or is not followed by meaningful analysis.
- You fail to develop or share insight into your specific role in teams and the strengths and weaknesses of this role. You can't identify anything you do in a team other than 'strongly lead'.
- You don't provide detail or evidence of the good teamwork skills you claim.
- You don't show a sophisticated approach to team dynamics.
- You underestimate the difficulties and commitment team interactions involve.

A note about sports

Talking teams brings up the question of sports. And the answer is, yes you can talk about sports in your essays *so long as* you avoid talking about season averages, topspin, point spreads, Manchester United's goalkeeper, or any other factual or technical data. Get off the fanzine stuff and onto the topic: you. What

is your personal experience of the passions and emotions that make sports great? It is always fine to talk about competition, adversity, personal battles, team struggles, fears, performance pressure, team bonding and team-mate reliance, split-second decisions, triumphs, overcoming odds, disappointment – and how these experiences have made you or changed you.

ARCHETYPE 8: KEY INFLUENCES, MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS

1. Examples

Describe the individuals that you look up to as role models in your professional work. (Michigan)

Describe the characteristics of an exceptional manager using an examination of someone whom you have observed or with whom you have worked. Illustrate how his or her management style has influenced you. (Tuck)

Please provide us with a summary of your personal and family background. Include information about where you grew up, your parents' occupations, your siblings, and perhaps a highlight or special memory of your youth. (Anderson)

2. Recognition keywords

Influence, background, memory, advisor, mentor, role model, counsellor, guide, inspiration, impact, impression, effect, shape, influence, guru, tutor, coach.

3. The underlying issue

If you have read any biography or autobiography, you will know that one of the key ways to get insight into a person is to find out who among parents, mentors and advisors were the defining influences in his or her life, particularly at a formative stage. In this question, the admissions committee employs the same technique. They want to learn more about you by understanding the mentoring forces that have shaped you. What you know is interesting to the committee, but how you learned it and who you learned it from consolidates their understanding. They are asking, 'Where are you coming from?'

There are two types of mentoring influence: those where you had no say in the matter, for example your parents, and those later in life where you had a choice. Early influences are significant because of their enormous formative power. Later influences are significant because, among other things, they show

your choices at work. Who you choose to mentor you says a lot about the kind of person you are aiming to become.

In addition to wanting to understand your influences, Adcom wants to see your ability to form and sustain mentor relationships. If you can form lasting relationships with senior advisors and protectors, you are a much better bet for big career success. Mentors will groom you for big things, promote you when you are ready and help watch your back when the blame-pack goes hunting.

Strong influence can come in inanimate forms as well. If you have a fundamental shaping experience or source of inspiration and guidance – if you are a performing jazz pianist, or you did your years of Peace Corps service on a remote Pacific island, or you have rebuilt your life in the army – the committee wants to know, particularly if you can say how this will positively affect you in your chosen business career.

4. How to tackle it

Remember, the essay is not about the mentor, it is about you, so you have to be able to say how and why this relationship is important to you and how it advances your candidacy. The familiar questions of self-analysis apply: Why is he a role model for you? Which of her qualities resonate with you? How has he changed or improved you as a candidate? How has she pushed you to professional or personal self-examination and self-learning, or a goal you would not otherwise have achieved? What would not be there in you if you had never got to know this person? How has he changed your worldview or facilitated your development as a manager or leader? In other words, explain yourself through explaining why you chose this relationship or influence and what it has done for you.

Similar questions apply if you are talking about non-human forms of influence. Why is the activity or experience meaningful? How does it nourish you? How has it changed your perspective? How is this relevant to your claim on a place at business school?

The essential elements of this essay are:

a. An anecdote which points to the nature of the mentor (or other influence) and the nature of the relationship (or experience).
b. Analysis, including key qualities of the mentor (or influence).
c. You in action, embodying the principles that you have been influenced towards.

The question may not directly ask for it, but as usual it is better to go with a story: find an anecdote that epitomizes your mentor or your relationship with the mentor. Pick a moment. Where were you, what were the circumstances, what did you say, what did she say? Or perhaps you were not directly

involved in the anecdote – maybe you just saw your mentor in action and soaked up the lessons. What happened? Don't say he was incredible, wise and motivating. Say why.

The essay should also take the reader back to you in action, using the learning and influence you have gained as you make your way in the world. Give specific examples of how you have integrated the mentoring wisdom into your actions. Perhaps you have even gone further and adjusted and tweaked your mentor's teaching to suit you? How?

Choosing the mentor

Mentors don't come too easily, so you probably won't be spoiled for choice here. If you have to pick between two, choose the one where the discussion will brush up against your themes. For example, if one of your themes is 'creative technology buff', you can use your high school computer teacher as an early mentor. But, as we have seen before in choosing stories and events, the choice of mentor is less important than the reasons for the choice. The committee is less concerned with who you pick than why you pick them. Having said that, there are still clear choices of mentor or influence to avoid:

- Don't choose someone from sports, the movies or popular culture – even if they really have had a great influence on your life. There's no real relationship, so it doesn't count. And it looks like you spend your life on the couch, or reading gossip magazines, and that is not the image you want to present.
- Don't just choose the most senior person you know. You will trigger the questions: How well do you know this person? How well do they know you? How much mentoring really goes on? If you cannot show evidence of a real, ongoing relationship, it will look like you are desperate to impress. (But sometimes it is justified. On my Gmat prep course, there was a woman who was on Hillary Clinton's staff in Washington, DC – it was absolutely appropriate for her to cite Hillary as a mentor.)

Generally, you should avoid picking academic mentors, for the same reason you avoid using them as referees. Business schools would much rather you are influenced by the CEO of Hewlett Packard than by your bearded, tweedy college professor. Don't ring their alarm bells.

Avoiding junior mindset

You are the junior in your relationship with your mentor and that is normal. But don't juniorize yourself more than necessary. You learned good stuff from

someone ahead of you in life or in your field, that's all. Try to keep it factual and objective, and incorporate balanced criticisms. If you come across as dizzy and star-struck, you might get into cheerleading school but you won't get into business school.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You don't show mentorship experience or an understanding of the dynamics of such a relationship.
- You choose your influence badly: someone you don't know well, or who doesn't fit with the thrust of your application message.
- You don't have an insightful anecdote about your mentor, or yourself in relationship with your mentor. You don't give examples and details.
- You develop the analysis of your mentor but not of yourself. You fail to show how your mentor relationship has changed you and facilitated your development.
- You don't show why what you have learned is relevant to your application or the class you want to be a part of.
- You appear star-struck and lack critical judgement of your influence or mentor.

ARCHETYPE 9: DIRECT PERSONAL INQUIRY (WHO ARE YOU?)

1. Examples

What is your most valued tangible possession? What is your most valued intangible possession? (Berkeley)

Please select and answer one of the following essay questions: A. Please tell us about what you feel most passionate. B. If you were given a free day and could spend it anywhere, in any way you choose, what would you do? (Columbia)

If you were a character in a book, who would it be and why? What do you admire most about this character, and how does it relate to you personally and/or professionally? (Chicago)

2. Recognition

This essay can come in many forms and is recognizable by its direct examination of your character, biography, preferences, passions and non-work activities;

that is, its blunt intrusion into your personal space – often under the guise of asking you to say what other people would say about you. It sometimes asks for a creative format, such as writing the first page of your autobiography, or a letter to the incoming class, and so on.

3. The underlying issue

All essays are made better by making them more personal, but in this one the admissions committee is telling you that personal revelation is compulsory. This essay archetype exists due to the frustration of admissions committees that, no matter how much they ask, in so many ways, for the real person behind the application mask to come forward, they often don't get it. They get guarded, impersonal, generic, diplomatic statements. So they resort to bald-faced personal inquisition.

The trick, of course, is to take the committee on a real journey of personal exploration and revelation, while staying within your themes and on message, and not losing a strategic focus on what will be inferred from what you choose to talk about and how you portray yourself. No matter how personal you get, the direction you go in should reinforce the thrust of your application message.

The essay often targets your hobbies and extracurricular activities, and also often comes close to your 'contribution' essay – allowing you to show additional forms of personal interest, diversity and potential contribution to the class. If you don't get a 'contribution' essay in the set, you should use this essay as your primary statement of uniqueness and value-add diversity. Part of what is at stake in this question is your ability and commitment to your non-professional life. The school is not interested in workaholics. They want balanced people with plenty of attributes and interests that make them more interesting. The school won't mind what your non-work absorption is, but they will care that you have at least one serious one. (Your non-professional project cannot be a love interest – that's assumed – but it can be children.)

4. How to tackle it

Personal questions are intrinsically uncomfortable. You have a choice: either you can deal with the discomfort by hoping it will go away and no-one will notice if you offer safe statements with some window-dressing, or you can bite the bullet and provide a real window into you. Guess which strategy works best? Trust the fact that your application is confidential to all outside the admissions office and get on with it. Generally, if you think your answer to this essay is *too* revealing, it is probably about right.

Of course, personal does not necessarily mean 'heavy'. Revealing who you are just means sharing something genuine. Drop the mask. Be real. Be engaging.

Share your feelings and don't be stiff. Show your humour, and that you're interesting and fun to be around. Your response to this essay must, above all, be unique to you and be filled with details and observations that are intrinsically yours, showing special insight into you and the personal history that has made you 'you'.

This essay is one where applicants often give the committee too much information and leave them to sift through it. It's fine to start by laying out the spread of your non-professional life and interests, but the key task is to find an angle to your personal life that best represents you and focus on it. If you focus your personal statement around an extramural activity, you must take the reader to your passion for it. Even if the admissions officer would never, himself, consider joining an amateur electronics club, for example, your presentation should make it clear how obviously addictively great it is and why it is an outlet for you and what that implies about you.

The committee will not care which extramural passion you present. As with all your essays, the 'why' questions are the important ones: Why is it important to you? How has it influenced your perspective or your choices? How has it changed you or grown you? How does it relate to your wish to go to business school? Why should Adcom consider it important to your application?

Integrating the personal and professional

The most effective essays in the personal category are the ones that show an integrated, cohesive whole across professional and personal life – how the one feeds the other. If your themes stretch from work into leisure, and integrate the two, then you really start to come across clearly and strongly. For example, if in other essays you are proposing a career in media management, you could use this essay to share your passion for 1940–1950s radio-theatre nostalgia, saying how you have a vast collection of tapes, how you formed (leadership) a West Coast radio theatre society and allied website, how and why all this is personally meaningful to you. You therefore deepen your media theme, show how it is a passion as well as a profession, and thereby show a multifaceted but integrated life.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You don't respond personally to a personal challenge. Your response is too generic and safe.
- You don't say enough to differentiate yourself or raise interest about you.

- You don't demonstrate a real passion for the non-professional interests you have.
- You don't appear to understand yourself at a personal level. You fail to develop insights about yourself or share them with the reader.
- You don't make the connection between your personal attributes and the attributes demanded by business school or business life.
- You present a jumble of personal facts and interests, without focus.
- There is little or no link between your personal interests and the rest of your application message.

ARCHETYPE 10: CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION

1. Examples

Write about a time when you experienced change in an organization. Identify and evaluate your role in the process. (Wharton)

Please give an example of when you exhibited creativity in a personal or professional setting. Please describe your thoughts and actions. (Sloan)

Describe a recent international issue or event that has had a negative effect on the business or economic climate of a particular region of the world. How would you address this issue? What are the implications of your approach? (Chicago)

2. Recognition keywords

Transform, adapt, change, innovate, new situation, original, imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, inventive, creative, innovate, resourceful, vision, advance, improve, pioneer.

3. The underlying issue

The business world is now so geared to rapid transformation in response to new technologies, social and political currents, shifting markets, demographic change and globalization that probably the clearest test of leaders and managers today is their ability to deal with change. The spoils of corporate war go to those who most clearly see the shifting sands and are the savviest in adapting and renewing their enterprises. Creativity, once banished to the 'ladies in marketing', is now front and centre as a management skill.

At the same time, careers are not what they were and job security not what it was. Among the tests that you as a business professional will face in the future is career change: moving to a new part of an organization, or a different organization, or a new industry, or all of the above on the other side of the

world. Your ability to adapt, learn and creatively manage your career under inconstant conditions will be rigorously tested. Schools want to know that you have the ability to survive and thrive in an atmosphere of change. They want to see evidence of your innovation and creativity.

4. How to tackle it

This essay usually calls for the familiar format – the anecdote followed by implications. Once again you should, for choice, pick an anecdote that reinforces your overall positioning. As this essay conveniently takes you close to questions of leadership (it's a leader's job to innovate and adapt), try to pick a story that also casts you in the role of leader.

In analysing the implications of your story, place special emphasis on your ability to learn: it is the key to managing new situations. Also explain the professional or personal growth a forced change has pushed you towards. What self-examination or self-learning has it provoked? How has it helped you gain experience, or become a better manager or leader, or how else has it changed you? What does this say about your abilities or your preferences?

Career innovation and renovation

Show, also, that you are part of the breed of 'new' managers who expect situational and career change, and who know how to function in contingent, project-based work situations. If you cast yourself in a professional future where you work your whole life at Acme Inc., steadily inching your way towards the corner office, you will appear mentally unprepared for the twenty-first century. On the other hand, the committee is also looking for your management maturity and stability, so take care not to fall head first into 'new paradigm-itis'. There are good things about change, but lots of mistakes are made. Successful management in times of change often requires a high degree of conservatism, and sometimes just a stolid maintenance of the *status quo*. Sounding like a Wired groupie won't advance your cause either.

Talking about technology

Many students come to business school knowing a vast amount about their technological field. Often they do an MBA to generalize their technical specialty, learn something about leadership and prepare themselves for senior management. A question on change may open up a window to their technical specialty and, in the bid to impress with their knowledge, they may suddenly begin talking shop to the admissions officer. The reader is vastly more interested in personal insight than in any technical background. It is fine to give

the impression that you are on top of your field and that you will lead, or at least manage, the future in your field. But keep the focus on you and the jargon to a minimum.

5. How to flunk this essay

You will mess up this essay if:

- You don't appear to be innovative in mindset.
- You don't demonstrate a willingness to deal with change in organizations and in your life, and the lifelong learning this implies.
- Your analysis does not further the reader's understanding of you. You fail to develop or share insight into your style of dealing with change.
- You expect an old-fashioned, one-job career path.
- You appear young and naïve in response to change. You don't balance a pro-change orientation with a nod to the classic lessons and practices of management.
- You talk about the changing world, new technologies and new opportunities without integrating this into who you are and why this is relevant to you and your career.

Other common essay types

The ten essay question archetypes above will allow you to recognize most of the essays you are likely to be presented with. You should also be ready for three other common essay question types: community service, self-review and the optional essay. Community service doesn't often come up directly but is heavily implied under the surface in many questions. Self-review and the optional essay are easily recognizable, and always come up in more or less the same way.

COMMUNITY SERVICE ESSAY

It is debatable whether a community service profile will make you better at business school or better in your career, but it is nevertheless very common for schools to want to know about your contribution to social causes or involvement with public issues. There is an undisguised moralistic framework being applied: you are a better person if you contribute to society in some altruistic way.

The committee's approach is that, if they are going to boost you to the top tier of business influence at the expense of the next eight or nine applicants,

they like to think that somehow, somewhere, you'll be the one who helps others along too. Their best guess about this is based on your history of social contribution in the past. This principle is so important that if you are not directly asked about community service, you should still find a way to put a paragraph about it into every application.

You have some latitude here, in that schools usually interpret community service very broadly. You do not have to have worked in a soup kitchen or taught inner-city kids. Anything that is not your job – and not a family, friends or an obvious leisure activity – and involves social issues and is done for free, is presentable as community service. You can go for a less orthodox interpretation, such as being a web-radio DJ, or doing equipment set-up at your local summer salsa festival.

Community service is a golden key

Community involvement can incorporate almost any of the elements that come up in the other essay archetypes, or any of the attributes Adcom seeks. Your service can be a teamwork activity, it can be a success story, it can support your diversity claim, it can demonstrate your values in action, it can be the basis of a mentorship relationship, or it can say something about how you use your personal time. Therefore, the community essay will let you develop one or more of these topics if there is no question that lets you do it directly. Reciprocally, you can talk about community service in any of these essays if there is nowhere else to put community service. This is a great help in plugging holes as you map your message to the questions, as explained below.

The multifaceted nature of community involvement tasks also means that you can usually find a way for your volunteering to reinforce at least one of the central themes of your application. It should also reinforce the leadership theme if you pick a community involvement where you launched a project, developed an organization or organized a program.

For choice, talk about a community activity that differentiates you: if you developed a line in free-range eggs on behalf of the local co-op, or you were an assistant on a cycle team for the Tour de France, that's intrinsically more interesting and valuable (to your application) than if you went on a river clean-up. Also, try to keep to recent activities. If you go back to high school to find a volunteer engagement, you flag the fact that you've done nothing since. (But if your high school community service was the beginning of an ongoing and future involvement in a cause you still support, then it signals long-term community involvement.)

As community service has become something of a checklist item for MBA applicants, it pays to be subtle in promoting this part of yourself. Do it as if it were a natural part of who you are and what you do with your time. If you visit an elderly persons home once a week, don't start an essay with, 'My

community service involvement is visiting an elderly persons home,' as if the fact that it is community service is more important that what it actually involves. Just say what you do and let Adcom check community service off their list. As usual in your analysis, be sure to say why you chose the activity you did, and how it sheds light on you and dovetails with the other parts of your candidacy.

What do you do about the community service experience requirement if you don't have any? Certainly, avoid making lame excuses such as you are too busy, or you travel a lot for work, and so on. First, excuses of any kind on any topic look bad in your application. It is always better to acknowledge a fault, say how you fixed or are fixing it, and move on (see advice on dealing with weak points in the optional essay section, below). Second, chances are there will be many in the applicant pool who volunteer despite heavy workloads, and that only makes you look doubly bad. Face the inevitable: the only way to satisfy the community service requirement is to do some community service. More is better, but even a day's worth will allow you to present a 'recent' example of the kind of things you do.

SELF-REVIEW ESSAY

This essay asks you to evaluate yourself as an outsider might. You may be 'appointed' as a member of the school's admissions committee and have to write the evaluative assessment for your file, or you may be asked to write your own review for a promotion at work, and so on. Depending how the question is phrased, the essay may just ask for strengths and weaknesses, or it may ask for a full and comprehensive evaluation of your candidacy. The broader the scope of the question, the stiffer the test. On the one hand, the committee is saying, 'Tell us what you want to, in the way you want to,' which is a great opportunity to get your message across without having to pay lip service to the question. You have a blank slate: you can and should put down the cleanest possible version of your application message to the committee. On the other hand, you have nowhere to hide: if you cannot get your argument for admission clearly and definitively made here, your reader will be most unsympathetic.

Your approach to this question should be driven directly by your profiling results and prepared message (see Section Two). Put down your profile, themes and message, flavour it with some self-criticism, dress it up in terms of pros and cons, and you should be close to done.

There are two main dangers associated with this essay:

- As with the failure essay (see above), you must show enough maturity to own up to faults and weaknesses and take responsibility for them.

As with the failure essay, this also gives you the opportunity to show how diligently you work on your weaknesses.

- This question invites lists of attributes, and it is fine to use listing techniques. But don't forget to select, group and focus your attributes so that the main points of your candidacy are easy to grasp.

THE OPTIONAL ESSAY QUESTION

Often the final question in the set is one that gives you the chance to say anything you feel is important, that you think the admissions committee should know, that you have not been asked about. There are mixed opinions as to whether to do this essay or not, and there is no right or wrong answer. The advantage of doing it is you get more space to make your claim; the disadvantage is that the criterion of relevance and interest is far higher. If you waste the reader's time a bit in the other essays, well, that's time they have committed to you anyway. If you ask them for more time, and you waste that, you're in trouble.

In deciding whether to do the essay or not, don't worry about drawing attention to your bad points. Unless the admissions officer has had too many martinis (not likely), all your bad points will already be unmistakably blinking on a spreadsheet. Ask yourself, is this extra essay definitely going to add a *new dimension* to a potential problem, and more generally to Adcom's understanding of my claim to a place? If the answer is 'no', don't do the essay. If it is 'yes', then go ahead, particularly if you have genuinely not been able to find a place for a critical piece of your profile, and that piece changes the picture. Make it crystal clear what the relevance of the extra information is and how it relates to the rest of your candidacy. Remember that there is normally a word limit for the optional essay, but there is no call to use all the space you have. Make your additional points and sign off.

Dealing with weak points

Many people use the optional essay to excuse negatives in their profile – bad college grades or Gmat score, or work gaps and unemployment – so much so that there is a default assumption that the extra essay will be about this. The excuses can get pretty lame, so disassociating yourself from this tradition is an excellent reason not to use the optional essay at all if you can do your necessary explaining in one of the other essays.

If you have to use the optional essay to renegotiate your weaknesses, be sure to explain the situation without excusing yourself – let Adcom excuse you or not. Be brisk and forthright. If there is some circumstantial information the committee should know, tell them straight. If you made a mistake, acknowledge

the mistake, say how you have worked on yourself not to make it again and move on. If you dwell on it, so will they.

Here's how to think about whether to excuse yourself in this essay (or any other):

- Is your problem a finite thing that is definitely in the past? If you can show that the problem was a one-off, related to a specific mix of circumstances, inexperience, timing and bad luck, or any factors that are definitely over or you have unequivocally fixed, then you are okay. Say what happened and, if learning is appropriate to the event, what you've learned. Stay optimistic and upbeat and assume future success, given better circumstances.
- Is your problem a factor that continues into the present? If your problem is not clearly over – if, say, you got a bad Gmat because you have test-taking stage fright, or you have a stormy relationship with your spouse – obviously the committee will be thinking this problem could recur at any time. Better that you don't say anything.

Don't ever whine, moan or curse your luck. Don't blame the Gmat system or any other system or committee, or person. Don't tell a sob story. There's no sympathy vote to get you into business school. As in business, you are either on top of things or you are not.

Multiple archetypes in one essay

You can now recognize the broad archetypes of the questions the committee will ask you. Be prepared, however, for the fact that there will not usually be a direct match between the archetype and the question posed: it is very common for schools to try to scramble up the picture by asking questions that incorporate two or more archetypes. They do this because they have more topics they want covered than the number of questions they can ask; because they try to stop applicants cutting-and-pasting material between different applications; and because they don't want people hurting their application by buying last year's model essays on the Web. The following are some examples of double- and triple-archetype questions:

> Why are you seeking an MBA or IMBA from the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business? What do you hope to experience and contribute? What are your plans and goals after you receive your degree? (Chicago)
> *Archetype analysis*: **Why an MBA? + Contribution**

> Leadership is highly valued at the Johnson School. Describe a leadership

decision made by a person who you admired and respected. What outstanding leadership skills were demonstrated and what impact did the decision have on you? (Johnson)
Archetype analysis: **Leadership + Mentors and influences**

Recognizing that successful leaders are able to learn from failure, discuss a situation in which you failed and what you learned. (Harvard)
Archetype analysis: **Leadership + Failure**

What is motivating you to seek an MBA education at IMD? Why do you believe you should be admitted to the IMD MBA program and what will you be able to contribute that is unique and would make you a valuable addition to the class? (IMD)
Archetype analysis: **Why an MBA? + Contribution**

What makes work fulfilling? Describe a situation where, as a team member or project leader, you have made work more interesting or enjoyable for your group. (Michigan)
Archetype analysis: **Personal inquiry + Team**

The Darden School seeks a diverse and unique entering class of future leaders. How will your distinctiveness enrich our learning environment and enhance your prospects for success as a leader? (Darden)
Archetype analysis: **Contribution + Leadership**

Why did you choose your current job? What is your most notable achievement and most notable failure in your current job? How do you hope to see your career progress over the 5 years following the MBA programme? (London)
Archetype analysis: **Achievement + Failure + Why an MBA?**

On the basis of your experience of working in and leading teams (either in your professional or personal life), please reflect on how you plan to contribute to your study group and the wider school community. (London)
Archetype analysis: **Team + Contribution**

Upon completion of your MBA at the Johnson School, what will classmates say about you or how will they remember you? (Johnson)
Archetype analysis: **Personal inquiry + Contribution**

Tackling the double- and triple-archetype question

This is two or three essays in one and, obviously, you have to cut your cloth to cover them all inside the word limit. Generally, you should give each part equal weight, but if you have a strong story or an obvious way to promote your themes in one part, and for the other you have nothing special, then weight

the essay towards the archetype you deal with better. The committee will not take out a ruler to check that you wrote as much for part A as for part B. First prize in this kind of multifaceted essay is to find the implied synergy between the two or three archetypes that the school has put together in the question. Very often the question specifically asks for it, as with Harvard above. But sometimes it does not.

10 Mapping approaches

You are now at the point where you can recognize each question for the archetype or mix of archetypes it represents, and therefore what it demands in response. This should greatly assist you in judging which part of your profile goes with which question in the set; where primarily to make each of your theme points; where each part of your message is most relevant; which of your characteristics, aptitudes and preferences you can expose in each essay location; and which stories to choose to back them up.

Balancing the essay set as a whole

You need to put as much consideration into the structure, balance and combined impact of your essay set as you do into each of your individual essays. Remember that the reader will probably read them in one sitting, probably within fifteen minutes. Although each essay contributes in its own way, the full set must interlock and make a coherent statement, and reflect a consistent positioning. There are two different approaches to balancing a message across the question set: the 'category approach' and the 'theme approach'.

Category approach

The category approach begins with a direct commitment to covering the various categories a full application message should cover: why an MBA?, professional aspirations, personal attributes, strengths, achievements, teamwork, community involvement, leadership, diversity-contribution, values, and so on. It then requires figuring out which question will best allow you to talk about each category. For example, the 'why an MBA' question can be a vehicle for your career plans, the 'leadership' essay can talk about your motivational skills, the 'contribution' essay can be about your passion for Chinese

mind–body remedies and the 'team' essay can allow you to develop your community service profile.

In this approach, each essay highlights a different aspect of you, which ensures breadth and conveys a total picture of a well-rounded, multifaceted person. Along the way you will, perforce, show a balance of professional, personal and societal interests and involvements. The risk in this approach is that there could be little holding it all together. Each essay can describe a different part of you, but the integrated whole could be hard for the committee to find. You could come across as unfocused and your message may struggle to find a coherent, memorable thread.

Theme approach

The theme approach stands the category approach on its head. Your guiding light is profile focus and clarity, not breadth. Here you take your two to four key themes (as developed in Section Two) and you find ways to make these theme points in every essay. No matter what the topic, you finesse it in such a way that you return the reader to your themes, using whatever stories or experiences fit the task.

The advantage of the theme approach is that it tightly focuses and defines you as a candidate. The committee will be left in no doubt as to the most important pieces of your profile and how they fit together. The potential problem with this approach is that it can become repetitive and you can come across as a one-trick pony. To a certain extent, this problem can be countered if you explore your theme thoroughly, stressing a different aspect of it – and therefore of yourself – each time you bring it up. Nevertheless, the multitalented, versatile candidate that you are could get lost.

Combining theme and category approaches

In almost every situation, the best approach is to combine the two methods. Here you make each essay stand on its own as an exploration of a different aspect of your profile, giving you breadth; at the same time, you consistently reinforce your themes, giving you focus and coherence. Generally, if you have a highly diversified profile with interests and achievements in many areas, you should make heavier use of the theme approach. If you have been very focused in your life and career so far, you should tend towards the category approach.

As you consider your essay set as a whole, you should be alive to potential holes in your story. Once you have decided what to include and where to put it, try to anticipate what might strike the reader as missing – what questions might come up, particularly about your transitions from one thing to the other? What about the eighteen months you spent in Peru? Why there? What

exactly made you go from being a marine biology graduate to a Bear Stearns analyst (and how did you do it)?

Worked example: mapping an essay set

STEP 1: ARCHETYPE ANALYSIS

This section, which uses a recent Columbia essay question set as a sample, takes you through the process of mapping your application onto the essay questions. First, take each essay in turn and do an archetype analysis:

1. What are your short-term and long-term post-MBA goals? How will Columbia Business School help you achieve these goals? (Limit 1,000 words)
Archetype analysis: **Why an MBA?**

2. Please cite and explain a specific situation in which you demonstrated initiative. (Limit 500 words)
Archetype analysis: **Leadership + Creativity and innovation**

3. Describe an experience in which the relationships you developed enhanced the outcome of a team effort. (Limit 500 words)
Archetype analysis: **Team**

4. Please select and answer one of the following essay questions: (Limit 250 words) A. Please tell us about what you feel most passionate. B. If you were given a free day and could spend it anywhere, in any way you choose, what would you do?
Archetype analysis: **Personal inquiry**

5. (Optional) Is there any further information that you wish to provide to the Admissions Committee? (Please use this space to provide an explanation of any areas of concern in your academic record or your personal history.)

STEP 2: ASSESS THE GAPS AND OPENINGS

Note first that the archetype analysis reveals that you have *not* been asked directly for strengths/achievements; weakness/failure; diversity/contribution; ethics; community; or mentors/influences. However, some of these topics are, of course, too significant to leave out. Depending on how important they are to your particular profile, you must look for subtle ways to include them.

You could do the following:

- To talk about your mentor, you could say that you would spend your free day with your mentor.

- To talk about community involvement, you might say you are most passionate about the community of kids you teach inline skating to on a Saturday afternoon.
- You might talk about community or about your profile strengths in the team effort essay, or you could put profile strengths in your demonstrated initiative essay (or both).
- You could use the optional essay to explain that you are an orthodox Jew, and how that gives a certain ethical framework to your business outlook.

In summary, as long as it's plausibly relevant to the question, you can frame your answers in such a way that significant parts of your profile and message get aired, even if they are not directly asked for.

STEP 3: REVISED MAPPING

Once you have mapped everything in your message onto the questions, the revised results might look like this:

1. What are your short-term and long-term post-MBA goals? How will Columbia Business School help you achieve these goals? (Limit 1,000 words)
Archetype analysis: **Why an MBA?**

2. Please cite and explain a specific situation in which you demonstrated initiative. (Limit 500 words)
Archetype analysis: **Leadership + Creativity and innovation + Profile strengths**

3. Describe an experience in which the relationships you developed enhanced the outcome of a team effort. (Limit 500 words)
Archetype analysis: **Team + Community + Profile strengths**

4. Please select and answer one of the following essay questions: (Limit 250 words) A. Please tell us about what you feel most passionate. B. If you were given a free day and could spend it anywhere, in any way you choose, what would you do?
Archetype analysis: A. **Personal inquiry + Community**; **B. Personal inquiry + Mentors and influences**

5. (Optional) Is there any further information that you wish to provide to the Admissions Committee? (Please use this space to provide an explanation of any areas of concern in your academic record or your personal history.)
Archetype analysis: **Ethics and values**

The essay mission statement

Once you have completed a process such as this and you are clear which part of your message each essay will carry, the points you will convey and which of your stories to use to do it, you should create a one- or two-sentence 'essay mission statement' that summarizes your mission for each essay. For example, for essay two, above, you could guide yourself with the following statement: 'I will show how I demonstrated initiative by discussing the day I stepped in as an emergency producer on a live TV show (media player theme). I'll discuss the leadership qualities and creativity under pressure that were required, and state my other main strengths: cool head, adaptability, mental toughness and maturity.'

The essay mission statement should help guide you and keep you on message as you write, so that everything that is necessary gets said, but nothing superfluous creeps in. As you go along, check each point against your mission statement and throw out anything that doesn't fit.

SECTION FOUR
Writing Tools and Methods

11 Principles of better writing

Section Three was about how to recognize the questions you face and how to parcel your application message (developed in Section Two) onto them strategically. Now we move to the level of the single essay. This section will be about how to write an essay that gives your message the best possible promotion. We will examine the various tools and techniques of attracting and retaining the reader, and getting him to absorb your message. This will be handled in six parts:

- *Chapter 11*: Relevance and importance; principles of good writing; essay pitfalls to avoid
- *Chapter 12*: Mechanics of essay organization, idea discipline, and argument flow
- *Chapter 13*: Writing a first draft
- *Chapter 14*: Improving expression – polishing sentences and phrases

Relevance and importance

The art of being read begins with understanding what's important, relevant and attractive to your specific reader at a specific time. If you write about something a reader needs or wants to know, when she wants to know it, your text becomes intrinsically attractive. A person is only going to read the newspaper's front page if he wants to know what's going on, or the instructions for the DVD player when she wants to connect it up: that is, when there is, *benefit* to reading because an informational (or entertainment) need is served. If your content is outside the reader's current field of interest or need, it will be unattractive no matter how well you write or how 'grabbing' your introduction is.

Similarly, your admission essay readers won't be attracted to your text unless it helps fulfil their need. So, what do they need? They need to fulfil their

various responsibilities to their stakeholders by succeeding in the two tasks that admissions officers are responsible for: selecting the best candidates and constructing a balanced, diverse class. When they read you, they need to find out how good you are, what you might bring to the school and what differentiates you from the other applicants, so they can accomplish these two selection tasks.

Bear in mind, as discussed in Chapter 1, career admissions officers are human resources professionals with the general set of interests and skill-sets that you might expect from this profession: they are trained and experienced in analysing human motivations, challenges and choices, and people's ability to function in organizations. They are interested in and responsive to insightful, carefully motivated self- and life-path analysis. They are not primarily business or technology types.

Passing the 'so what' test

Given this set of needs and this target reader profile, expect your readers to constantly be asking the pointed question, 'So what?' If you give them a fact, a story, an observation or any other piece of information, they will want to know: Why is this relevant? Why am I reading this about you? What understanding about you do I get from it? What am I learning about your growth, transition, development, experience or insight? Why does this advance your candidacy?

It is *your* job to answer these 'so what's' by showing how each piece of your essay connects to you and your argument for an admissions ticket, and framing this, at least in part, in human resources and organizational behaviour terms. Just as you skip the dense bits in the magazine story in search of what's interesting, so the admissions officer will skim over anything that doesn't take her to more relevant information and insight about you.

So when you are writing a story on your musical education in Chechnya, or the day you pitched a perfect Little League game, or why pandas shouldn't be kept in the national zoo – be clear in your mind that the admissions committee fundamentally doesn't care about all that stuff. If they were reading for fun they would be reading the John Grisham novel on their bedside table. They are only following your meanderings through your activities and philosophies as a means to an end, and that end is knowledge of you. Therefore, it is your responsibility to make it obvious why each detour furthers their insight and helps their assessment of you. Anything in your writing that doesn't take the reader closer to significant insight about you fails the criteria of relevance and importance. It is, therefore, bad writing.

Principles of good writing

The reader's attention is a finite resource. All writing competes for attention with other writing, and with other calls on the reader's time. As you sit down to compose your essays, take a moment to visualize the last moments in the life cycle of your essay: there it sits, buried in the middle of a pile on the reader's desk, making its way to the top as she tries to get a few more done in between meetings, emails, phone calls, fetching Mickey from daycare and getting to the gym. Remember, on average each application gets about twenty minutes, and each essay about two to three of those minutes. And reading, as we know, is hard work at the best of times.

Now she's reading your Essay 1. Her mind is half on the emails she has to send and the dean's recent memo. Chances are, as soon as there's a confusing or boring bit, her eyes will lift off the page and land again further down in the essay, like a stone skipping on water, perhaps reading a sentence somewhere in the middle – another boring bit – skip again, looking a little further down the page, right, yep, read the last sentence and done.

You don't want this. Being important and relevant is a start. But you also have to produce and package the information so that your copy goes down quickly and easily, like ice-cream on a hot summer's day. You want the reader to pick up the essay, be able to tell where it's going in the first sentence or at least the first paragraph, be sucked in through a good story, be clear why each part is there, and why the next part follows the preceding one, and be fully aware of what key points are being made. You want her to put her nose down at the first word and not to lift it again until the end.

Here's how to do it:[4]

1. Beware the 'written word'

For most people, writing means manufacturing an arcane species of language called 'the written word'. When we 'put pen to paper', the way we talk is suddenly not good enough, and we strive for higher, more literary prose with different, bigger words, longer sentences and more complex, indirect constructions. The self-important obfuscation of most academic, legal, scientific, business and government writing serves to harden these habits. What we get is artificial and impersonal text that fogs up the communication window between writer and reader.

This would not be too much of a problem if all we ever needed writing for was to record a scientific experiment or compose a letter to the electricity company. But it turns out we often have to attract, stimulate and capture a reader. Professional writers, who do this for a living, have all had to unlearn the formal style and, if you want to write decent essays, so should you. Listen

to the rhythm, structure and vocabulary of (educated) everyday speech and write like that.

2. Delete the bits that readers skip

The simplest and most important guide to good writing is this: 'When you write, leave out the bits readers skip.' If you want to know what readers skip, think what you try to avoid reading – that is, the kind of writing you find in legal documents, academic tomes, technical manuals and the like:

- generic, impersonal statements and other forms of official speak;
- lists of facts, dates, places and figures;
- all forms of generalization and abstraction.

We've already established that readers will also skip when:

- they have information that is not important or relevant to them, or they can't work out its relevance;
- they are given information they already know.

The other standard causes of reader fatigue are:

- boring, dull, bland, monotonous language and sentence construction, and poor, clumsy or tired writing;
- writing where it is hard to piece together the argument or unscramble confusing or confusingly irrelevant information.

3. Write what readers read

When I was in journalism school, the instructor came in one day and wrote the word 'People' in fourteen-inch-high letters on the board. The lesson: don't overestimate people's interest in theory and abstractions. No matter how much we cub reporters might have thought we were there to write about policy and ideological debates and other high-minded matters, what most readers actually *really* read was human-interest stories. (And this was a classy newspaper.) If you are in any doubt about this, think about what you read for preference – and what magazines are full of: sharply written stories about people doing stuff that we are curious about. In other words, you and I and everyone else most naturally read stories about people in situations where we learn something new.

The professional writers' reality is that the art of being thoroughly read by satisfied readers rests heavily on telling human-interest stories. If that's what it takes for professional writers to get read, all the more so for you. If

you don't follow this principle, your reader will soon be drifting and skimming no matter how good your prose technique is, or how correct your point.

Choosing and managing human-interest stories

In your profile analysis, you recorded stories and anecdotes associated with each of the brainstorming prompt questions. If you have lived a reasonably full life and you have done your brainstorming right, you will have many interesting, enlightening and amusing anecdotes relating to your main profile points. Given the tight word limits of most MBA essays, you will be faced with hard choices about which stories to include. How do you decide between them? What are the criteria that separate a story more useful to your application from one that is less useful?

How to do it

Apply the 'carry freight' principle. In well-written movie scripts, every scene, event and piece of dialogue advances the plot and/or character development and works to further the main narrative. Nothing is superfluous. Any scene that isn't a vehicle for character and plot gets axed. In the parlance of movie scriptwriters, every scene must 'carry freight' for the movie as a whole. In deciding which story elements to include in your essay set, or which essay to put them in, you should be driven by the same principle: every story, and every element of every story, must carry freight for you. Ask yourself: Is this story a vehicle for my message? Does this story say what I'm trying to say, or prove what I'm trying to prove? If I'm trying to show the admissions officer that I'm a supportive team member, does this story do the job? Or does that story do it better?

By implication, if you have a favourite anecdote that doesn't clearly advance your profile and message, it is useless to you. (Or, if you want to use it, you must change your message.) For example, you may have an 'IT specialist' theme that collects together various points from your personal and professional life. In your profiling you may have recorded the story about the time you got a call from a New York client when you were in Bahrain; it was three in the morning and you had to go downstairs to the hotel lobby in your pyjamas to find a computer to get online to sort out a server crash thousands of miles and many time zones away. That story will advance your profile in terms of IT technical expertise, work ethic, international experience and team spirit. It won't say anything about leadership, your personal preferences or your career goals.

Decide what you need to say and pick your stories accordingly. Obviously, where possible, the story that says various things about you – values, strengths, goals, unique attributes, and so on – is usually better than the story that says

only one thing. But sometimes it pays to focus the reader's mind entirely on one spot.

Telling a story puts you on the road to being read with interest. But simply putting the story out there is not enough. Bad story technique makes the reader plough through a watered-down, reported-speech version of events. A good story immerses the reader in the action and explores the personal drama. All good stories contain conflict and predicaments, and work towards resolution. Rather than simply report what happened, recreate the series of incidents and experiences for the reader. Let him experience what you experienced and relive the event as you relive it.

4. Be emotive

Your essay will be more prominent and penetrating if you touch the reader in some way. This does not mean you burden her with a sob story. But you should aim to be emotionally moving and to elicit responses: a sympathetic surge of pride, a moment of happiness or sadness, a flash of anger or despair shared with you. Emotions show that you are human, that you are alive inside and that you can connect with the humanity of your reader. If his eyes smart at the sad stuff and he feels pride with you at the proud stuff, you are getting through.

Bear in mind, also, the real-world reality that people (your admissions officer included) very seldom make decisions based only on facts. You don't need to look further than the stock market to see an example of where most people do extensive fact research and data analysis, and then make decisions based on hunches and emotions. You will be well served if you can touch your reader's emotional core, because subjective hunches and feelings will certainly be part of what decides whether you get in or not.

How to do it

There is no touching emotional buttons without telling compelling personal stories. There's no short cut to the technique and writing control necessary to manage emotional responses, but even a non-writer who weaves a tight yarn that doesn't back off from personal topics can expect to strike some chords. When you've written your piece, try it out on a friend to see if it works. Word choice counts a lot here: don't disconnect yourself from your subject matter by using a pompous, dry lexicon. Use warm, human, emotive words. For example, don't talk about your 'relatives', talk about 'mum and dad and Uncle Bob'. Don't talk about the 'malnutrition' you saw in Mozambique, talk about 'hungry people'. Don't say you had 'acute neuralgia', say you had a 'bad headache'.

5. Be visual: show, don't tell

The best writing uses words and actions to paint illuminating, memorable images. Literary critics call this technique 'imagery'. For example, consider Lady Macbeth, who, cracking under the pressure of guilt at the murder of Duncan, does not walk around saying, 'I feel guilty, very, very guilty.' That would be a complete yawn. Rather, Shakespeare has her rubbing and wringing her hands endlessly in simulated washing (of the blood off them) saying, 'Out, damned spot!'

A picture is, as they say, worth a thousand words. Your application essays are only about 2000 words in total, so you do the maths. For every picture you induce in the mind of the reader, you greatly boost both the extent and the punch of your statement. Images will always be more powerful and easier for the admissions officer to remember than a list of points, qualities, traits or qualifications – no matter how impressive any of them are.

How to do it

Go past merely presenting a statement; think of a moment in time that encapsulates the state or condition or feeling, and describe the associated picture. For example:

- If it was a wet day at the ballpark, and you say, 'It was soaking wet,' there is no picture. If you say, 'There was mud in my socks as I squelched up the river to first base,' you have planted an image in the reader's mind.
- When describing your experiences at an outdoor paramilitary camp in China, if you say, 'I was living rough,' there is no picture. If you say, 'I picked spiders out of my hair at lunchtime,' you have an image that tells it all.

Beware the standard clichéd images for certain descriptions and don't use them. For example, if it was hot outside, don't even think of saying, 'You could have fried an egg on the hood.'

6. Be specific, detailed and concrete

Think of the pleasure you get in a good photograph. Part of it is that it is clear and sharp. A fuzzy, smudgy picture is immediately offputting and unfulfilling. Similarly, if your descriptions are vague and general you will frustrate the reader. Precise details add life, colour and interest to your story. They make it unique and memorable. The details distinguish it from everybody else's story.

How to do it

Don't generalize or oversimplify your descriptions. When you tell a story, or when you talk about yourself, think of your pen or keyboard as a sharply focused lens that soaks up and reflects even the smallest detail. Talk in specifics and give examples: don't say, 'I'm a published scientist,' say, 'I'm the co-director of the Massachusetts Young Physicists Committee, and I had two published articles in the society journal last year.' Be faithful to names, dates, times, what you saw, what you heard, what you felt, what he said, what she said and all other such details associated with the specific event that will allow your reader to see, hear and touch the event along with you. For example:

> *General*: 'I'm a "people person" and I have lots of friends, and I'm always the centre of my social network.'
> *Specific*: 'My friends say I have a mobile phone dent on my ear, and it could be true – especially when it seems everyone calls me to find out where we're all meeting on a Friday night.'
>
> *General*: 'I've been good at numbers since I was a child. I was always first in my class at maths.'
> *Specific*: 'When I was about seven my older brother got a mental arithmetic game. You'd get a problem like 13×29 and you'd have to do it in your head before the egg timer ran out. I always won.'
>
> *General*: 'I've done a lot of sports activities in my life, both indoor and outdoor. This is a big part of who I am.'
> *Specific*: 'Open my closet and you will see . . . well there should be camping gear, but I lent it to Jake. There's my snowboard, my tennis shoes, two pairs of rollerblades (a five-wheeler for speed), my titanium rackets, a battered bike helmet, gloves, baseball bat, and, well, you could say I'm an action nut.'

Note how the boiled-down, generic versions could belong to any applicant. As soon as you put in details, not only do you get valuable pictures, but immediately the scene is unique to you and therefore you become memorable to the reader. While it is true that the details might take up more words in your essay, these are usually words well spent. Make your deletions where you are making vacuous statements nobody will remember.

The limits of adjectives

While adjectives have their uses, don't expect them to carry you very far. If you say it was a romantic beach, or a thrilling encounter or an interesting book, you are not telling the reader much. Instead, take the reader to the helicopter rescue and let her be thrilled. Or take her to the beach at Marsa Alam and let her think, 'How romantic!' In other words, rather than state your judgement – the

adjective – let the reader's perception unfold in response to your good description. Provide enough details so your readers can arrive at the judgement for themselves. (But don't give so many that they get bogged down in the ephemera.)

Details prove your claim

Part of your task in the essays is to convince the committee of the extent, validity and quality of your experience. The burden of proof is on you. If you were a trial lawyer attempting to prove a case, you would not just say, 'There are many indications that the accused is the murderer.' You would bring evidence of fingerprints, cellphone numbers dialled, voice recognition, eyewitness accounts, and every other possible detail, down to DNA samples, to make your case. Similarly, details help solidify the claims you make about your past. If you claim to have made a presentation to the Siemens Board at the company's head office in Munich, it doesn't hurt you to mention that from the boardroom you can see half of Bavaria. It's convincing. Let the details talk for you.

Details of number ground your story in the same way. Why say you led 'a team of consultants' if you can say you led 'a team of twenty-five auditors and ten operations software developers'? Don't say you 'implemented a new account management system', say you 'fired the HP contractor, took a one-year turnkey solution offered by IBM, and managed the integration of new sales efficiency and reporting systems to increase productivity by 17%, while reducing errors by 42% and saving the company $1.1 million'. (If this sounds like the way you have been coached to do a résumé, that's no accident. Résumés require detail for the same reason: to give credibility to your claims of experience and ability.)

Avoiding 'I am-itis'

Any general assertion of your capabilities – 'I am a fast learner, I'm a problem solver, etc.' – should be deleted if it cannot be corroborated with evidence (details) of successes that demand this skill, or specific examples or numbers in your favour, or credible merit awards, or a believable story where the qualities you claim are apparent. Don't say, 'I am proficient at . . .' Tell the story of what you did and let Adcom think, 'He is proficient at . . .'

7. Keep your prose, ideas, words and images fresh

The committee reads a lot of essays, on the same topics, from similar candidates, trying to prove identical attributes. Chances are, if something is a slightly tired phrase to you, it will be a stone dead one for them. If your story runs along predictable tracks and ends with a horrible, clichéd insight, your reader will not be fooled. Avoid banalities and platitudes: it will be assumed that you can't – or can't be bothered to – tell of events or express the implication

that uniquely reflects you. Your reader, with at least six years of tertiary education and many more years of professional and life experience, will recognize cliché for what it is: lazy thinking. Avoid all standard metaphors and known epiphanies. In other words, steer clear of beaches and sunsets and, unless you are a bona fide mountaineer, don't use mountain climbing as a metaphor for your personal or professional ascent. You won't believe how many times admission officers this year will read something like: 'Standing on top of that ledge I suddenly knew all my goals were achievable.' Yuck!

For the same reason, don't use jargon, acronyms or buzzwords, which will make your writing sound like a regurgitation of others' ideas you have read and heard along the way and not got around to passing through your own filter of perspectives or forming your own opinion of. In particular, leave out things that sound sexy in business and technology magazines. Talk about the companies in your industry, not the 'players in your space'. Say you want to help your clients succeed rapidly, not to 'post early client wins'. Say you got people to work well together to develop new ideas, not to 'create synergies for thought leadership'. As soon as your reader thinks you are mouthing off, or (worse) does not understand you, or (worst of all) is not fully sure that you understand yourself, your application is halfway to dead.

How to be fresh

Your ideas and prose will be fresh if you think of them yourself and express them in your own way. It's that simple.

8. Manage tone

Every essay you write demands a balance between a personal and a professional tone – which expresses the dilemma of how to be genuinely personal and open, while still maintaining the kind of business professionalism the committee is looking for from an applicant in a formal situation writing for people he doesn't know. Like body language, your writing tone communicates an enormous amount. Step back from your prose and try to feel what your tone communicates, and make sure that the 'inner' statement is congruent with the image of confidence and capability you are trying to project. To get your tone personal enough, it helps to think of yourself as talking to one person, not many. Write as if you are holding one side of a conversation, and the other person is just across the table. Don't write as if you are giving a speech in the Sydney Opera House. An essay is a frank and friendly chat with one person, where you are trying to create a memorable individual connection.

The following are the dos and don'ts of MBA essay tone:

- Be animated and optimistic. Project enthusiasm and an interest in yourself and the world. Come across as an upbeat problem solver.

- Be sincere. Your communication should feel open, upfront, direct and to-the-point. Don't give the feeling you are slickly 'giving them what they want to hear'. Adcom can smell a disingenuous statement at forty paces.
- Be humbly confident, neither arrogant nor self-effacing. Go easy on the bluster. Don't hype yourself or any of your experiences or contacts. Don't come across with the attitude that you will beat the odds. These are days of circumspection in the business world and being mostly successful most of the time is the best you should claim.
- Don't be too guarded or too abstract. Don't hide behind a professional or academic veneer, using pompous words and a dry 'objectivity' to poke gingerly at self-analysis from a safe distance, as though writing about someone else.
- It's okay to show you know a thing or two about what it means to struggle and overcome, but do not allow yourself any self-pity.
- Don't come off as indulged and pampered.
- Be practical and businesslike. Don't be whimsical or dreamy, or appear about to float off in flowery prose. Be emotive but not emotional.
- Don't be preachy. Don't sound like you think you know all the answers. No-one does.

Essay pitfalls to avoid

In the previous sections of this book, I have said much about the kinds of content that should go into your essay and how it should be expressed. This section warns of approaches that should be avoided and things that should *not* appear.

Don't mess with the truth

Don't stretch, twist or otherwise mess with the facts. Don't make claims that sound dodgy, even if true, unless you have thorough corroborating detail. Not only must what you say be true, it must be easily perceived to be true. The admissions officer, who has probably read 5000 essays, has an ear for a tinny sounding claim and unconvincing use of evidence. This is your first and, hopefully, last time doing MBA applications. Play the smart odds and stick with the truth. Anyway, you don't need to make things up – chances are your true stories, analysed properly, are just as useful to you as the ones you might be tempted to make up.

Don't suck up

Don't waste your own and everyone else's time telling the reader about the excellent reputation of the university, the wisdom of the faculty, the astuteness of the admissions committee, the beauty of the grounds, the size of the endowment, the outstanding nature of the student body, the power of the alumni network or any other form of eye-batting flattery. You are there to talk about you and why you will be a unique benefit to the school. Stick to the topic. (It's fine to refer to a school's excellence in highly specific terms, for example saying how your proposed career in real-estate finance would benefit from being at, say, Wharton, which according to your research has the top faculty in this field.)

Don't be a tin soldier

Show your intimacy and vulnerability. If you don't feel a twinge of embarrassment in sharing a certain story, failure or ethical decision – if it would be no problem if some prankster were to email your completed essays randomly to people in your personal and professional circle – then your essays are not personal enough. Adcom treats your essays as confidential, based on the assumption that confidences are being protected. Don't disappoint them in this. They don't have a prurient interest in your private life and thoughts, but they are serious about getting special inside knowledge about you.

Your essays are, obviously, still a professional task and you must stay on the right side of professional norms. Being personal is one thing, being inappropriate is another. Don't confess to being a shoplifter. Don't discuss bodily functions. Don't say anything you wouldn't say one-to-one to a trusted professional mentor. If you can maintain this personal–professional balance, you will distinguish yourself from most other applicants.

Don't try to be someone else

Many candidates try to be what they think the generic business school applicant is: conservative, respectable, quantitative, 'businesslike', and so on. It's natural to want to fit in with the business school ethic, but don't second-guess the committee and try to feed them what you think they 'want to hear'.

Trying to be a model applicant is not to your advantage because, contrary to popular belief, there is no accepted business school 'type'. The real business school ethos endorses a broad mix of backgrounds, experiences and opinions. If you try to reinvent yourself as something more normative, you will trade your individuality, personality and interest for an anonymity that won't be noticeable. Trying to be someone you are not practically screams poor self-confidence and low self-worth. If you're going to be rejected, at least be

rejected for who you are. It would be truly pathetic if you were to pose as someone else and be rejected.

Don't be generic

You will only get in if you differentiate yourself in a valuable way. The committee wants to know who you really are and what is particularly special and different about you. Therefore, you should at all costs avoid feeding them generic information. There will be nothing memorable and unique that stands out for the admissions officer to get a grip on.

How do you know if something is generic? Easy. If what you say could be on the next file or the next after that, it's generic. If what you say could only have been written by you, it's specific and unique. Forget what MBA applicants are supposed to be like and supposed to want. Talk about the career you want. Talk about your actual goals and motivations. Share your real hopes, dreams and fears. Give voice to your own values, your genuine beliefs and your real ethical or personal struggles.

Don't stereotype yourself

When dealing with your profile, try to anticipate and go beyond the stereotypes of background, ethnicity and job definition that may be associated with it. If you are an auditor, don't be a 'suit'; if you are a research scientist, don't sound as though you talk to lab mice. That is, rather than letting the reader loll comfortably in the personality types he might associate with you as a scientist, a Christian, an immigrant, an IT professional, a lesbian, an Asian, and so on, surprise him with non-conforming attitudes and attributes. Drill deeply enough into yourself so that you get below your typecasting and reach the layer where you are unique.

Don't try to be over-competent

Of course, the tendency is to be as adequate as possible, but you can go too far. Not only is nobody perfect, but you, as an applicant for professional education, are by definition incompetent in many respects. You are a work in progress and that's okay. Often, in the effort to demonstrate achievement and appear successful, applicants portray themselves as so competent that the committee wonders if they really need the MBA. Leave space in your application for the curriculum and extramurals to have plenty to teach you, and tell the committee what it is you need to learn.

Don't repeat material presented elsewhere

This shouldn't need explaining. The reader will have your complete file, so any repetition of its contents in the essays is a waste. You can, of course, reframe or cast a new light on facts appearing elsewhere in your file. Just avoid the dullness of repetition. Also, steer clear of that which is already obvious. If your Gmat is 750 and your college GPA is 4.0, don't write essays arguing your intellectual competence. It's obvious. Use your essays to show you are not just an egg-head.

Don't try to say too much

It is better to focus on a small piece of your story and chew it thoroughly than to bite off too much and choke on it. Make choices that narrow your horizons but allow you to deepen your analysis. Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Get as many of the details and facts about you – employment history, awards, positions held, and so on – into the application sheet question boxes so you are free to use the essays for developing your themes and message. The essays are not there for you to tell the committee didactically what you've done; they are there so you can show them who you are and what you are aspiring to become.

Don't make lists (particularly not of your past)

Don't go down a track that sounds like: 'After college in Wisconsin I worked for CNN in Atlanta, and then for the Georgia State Legislature, while taking evening classes in economics at City College, and followed this with a year in Taiwan, before coming back to work on my school applications, which I postponed for a year because my father had a bypass . . .' Not only will a list of activities and accomplishments dampen the reader's interest, but all you are really saying is that you have no idea what is important in your profile, or you can't be bothered to extract it.

Don't provide facts that are not integrated into the message

It's always a burden to follow a writer into the details of his argument. The reward for the reader is that the details ultimately make a solid case. Not so if they are irrelevant. Facts that are not interpreted or integrated into the story are just frustrating 'noise' the reader has to filter out. Don't make the reader work harder than she has to. Remember, your job is to pick, describe and analyse the most important things about you: you must work hard so that the reader does not have to.

Don't blame or point fingers

Don't ever say anything negative about anyone, or any group, or nationality, or company, or anything at all, no matter who did what to you or how badly it has affected your life. Avoid racist, sexist and all other forms of unkind speech. If you come across negatively, you will not be admitted anywhere. It's better to say nothing.

Don't get onto controversial topics

Stay clear of religion, politics, abortion, inner-city poverty, the war on drugs, 9/11, the Middle East, and social or ideological opinions of any kind. Not only could this be an automatic red light if you get the wrong reader, but all the time you spend on this you are not adding anything about why you are special, different and therefore valuable to the school. Your goal is to get in, not to convince anyone of anything. The only relevant topic is you. The reader won't care what your precious position is, and they won't be reading long enough to figure it out either way.

You can make an exception to this rule if an ideological perspective is an obvious part of who you are and what you plan to do. If you are a veterinarian activist, say, and you plan to launch an international animal medical non-profit foundation, you can make the necessary ideological claims.

12 Idea discipline: outline and structure

There is no good writing without good thinking. If you have your argument organized in your mind, and your essay moves forward in a measured way towards its goal, with all points in clear relationship to each other and to your message, then you are already halfway to good writing. If your essay does not demonstrate the discipline of lucid thought, language polish is not going to help you much.

Persuasive writing

Writing can have many different goals: to inform, to entertain, to direct, to transmit ideas or to persuade and convince. Whether it succeeds or not as good writing depends on the goal the writer has. Scriptwriters write primarily to entertain; journalists write to inform or persuade; poets write to create verbal beauty and transmit ideas; lawyers write to direct or to persuade.

MBA admissions essays fall into the category of informing and persuading: you are writing to persuade the admissions committee to admit you, and you do this by providing sufficient, relevant and compelling information about yourself. Your essays don't just describe you; they argue your case in front of the admissions jury. Whatever the surface details of any point you make, underlying this you are always saying an identical thing, which is: 'I deserve a place in this business school ahead of the next candidate because [I have this quality] ... [and here's the proof] ... [and this is how it supports my claim].'

Arguments rely, above all, on good structure. Structure is what orders the parts of the argument and ensures they fit together to move the reader towards the points you want made. The more systematic the plan of your essay, the better your reader will understand you. The rigour of structure knocks out waft, ramble and clutter.

Crossing the river

The structure of an argument is not merely a string of topics tied together. An argument has a form appropriate to persuasion – a form necessary to take the reader from where he is to another place where you would like him to be. Think of a persuasion essay as helping someone across a river: you take him by the arm and you lead him from one bank to the other, hopping from rock to rock. Each step is a rock that connects to the previous one and to the next one in a logical sequence. Just as you would plan your path across the river, you should plan your path to your essay's logical conclusions. Don't go in any direction that doesn't take you to your goal. Just as you wouldn't purposefully land on stepping-stones that don't get you further across the river, so your essay should not include information that doesn't support your argument.

Classic structures

You can and should make your own structure for each essay so that you have one that is best designed to promote the particularities of your argument. However, there are template structures that you can use directly or adapt to create your own structure. This section outlines the main types.

1. Shadowing the question

Multipart question

The most obvious – and often the best – structure is to shadow the question: providing answers in the manner and order they are sought by the question. You let the question imprint itself on your essay and shape its outline. This is a natural way to deal with questions that have two or more clear parts (e.g. outline your strengths and weaknesses). For example:

> Tell us about the most challenging team experience you've had to date. What role did you play? What factors made it a challenge for you? How did the group address these issues? (Fuqua)

A shadowing-the-question structure for this type of question might be as follows:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction – story of my most challenging team experience
- Paragraph 2: Story continued
- Paragraph 3: My role, self-analysis
- Paragraph 4: Factors that made it a challenge

- Paragraph 5: How the group addressed these issues and my role in this
- Paragraph 6: Analysis
- Paragraph 7: Analysis and conclusion

Series of examples

Another appropriate time for a shadowing structure is when you are asked for a number of instances or examples: 'Discuss two accomplishments, one professional and one personal' or 'What three lessons in leadership have you learned?' Here you can use the question as the defining structure for your essay, providing answers in series and at the appropriate length, given the number of points the question asks for.

A shadowing-the-question structure for this type of question may be as follows:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction – professional accomplishment story
- Paragraph 2: Professional accomplishment story continued
- Paragraph 3: Analysis of professional accomplishment
- Paragraph 4: Personal accomplishment story
- Paragraph 5: Analysis of personal accomplishment
- Paragraph 6: Analysis of skills and temperament common to both accomplishments
- Paragraph 7: Analysis continued and conclusion

When shadowing the question you can go light on signposting the transitions. It's obvious that when you start with a new point it is going to be the next one in an expected series. You don't need to labour the transition by saying something like: 'The other example that demonstrates my teamwork potential is . . .'

2. Time as structure

Time structures our days, weeks, months and lives, and it structures the narrative in books and movies. You too can use the chronological sequence of events to give your essay clear form and direction. For example:

> Recognizing that successful leaders are able to learn from failure, discuss a situation in which you failed and what you learned. (Harvard)

A time structure could be as follows:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction – setting up the preliminary explanatory information, conditions that were in effect before the event and which explain the event

- Paragraph 2: The failure story
- Paragraph 3: The immediate fallout and scramble to fix
- Paragraph 4: Later that day . . . A week later . . .
- Paragraph 5: Analysis (time = now)
- Paragraph 6: Analysis (time = future, what I would do next time) and conclusion

Comparing then and now

Occasionally, you might be asked to compare yourself at a previous age and era to how you are now. For example: 'How have you changed since college?' or 'By the time you graduate, in what way do you expect to be different to how you are now?' Or you yourself may simply choose to answer any of the essay questions you face by comparing yourself in two distinct time periods.

In such circumstances, it is natural to use time to structure you. You can either spend the first third of the essay in the past and the second third in the present, or vice versa. (The final third should be kept for analysis.) Or you can go backwards and forwards between the past and the present, comparing yourself then and now, item by item, thought by thought, until you reach a wrap-up analysis conclusion.

The structure might be as follows:

- Paragraph 1: Introduction – me now, my professional focus, interests and ambitions
- Paragraph 2: Me back then, professional focus, interests and ambitions
- Paragraph 3: Analysis or goals, skills developed and outlook developed
- Paragraph 4: Me back then, personal preferences, interests and outlook
- Paragraph 5: Me now, personal preferences, interests and outlook
- Paragraph 6: Analysis of development in outlook and understanding
- Paragraph 7: Analysis continued and conclusion

Outlining

You do better in getting your charge across the river if you plan your route – if you decide in advance which rocks you will land on and what the thread of your journey will be. An outline is a sketch plan of your structure: the point-form design of how your essay will advance the reader from one bank to the other. There are two forms of outline planning: visual and linear. Which one you choose is up to you. Assuming the essay topic, 'Why I need an MBA,' this section describes both approaches.

Visual argument outline

First, draw a rectangle in the middle of a page. Write the topic of the essay (e.g. 'Why I need an MBA') in the rectangle.

Next, draw lines out from the central rectangle (keeping the lines orthogonal to help clarity and readability). At the end of each line draw a secondary rectangle. In each one put one major supporting topic, for example:

- short-term goals
- long-term goals
- what experiences have led me to this point
- why an MBA (why not a PhD, etc.)
- why this school in particular
- why now

From each secondary rectangle (e.g. the one labelled 'short-term goals'), draw a line for each of the basic steps in the argument or major categories of information.

If there are further facts, details and examples to support these points, you can continue the process of topic boxes and lines as necessary.

Once you have the elements of each of your main points in place, you need to decide which points are going to be made first, which next, and so on. You build your case like an architect builds a house: each new piece rests on and fits in with what has been laid down before, and in turn supports what will follow. The simplest way to do this visually is to number-order your points on your diagram (see Figure 12.1).

Linear argument outline

A linear outline will do the same as above, in list format, using headings and subheadings. Word-processing software will provide you with a template to do this if you need it. Your essay topic is your main heading, your chief supporting topics are your subheadings, and so on. Under each of the headings you write contributing points, or lists of sub-points as necessary. As you add content around your main and subsidiary points, they should support and reinforce the logical direction of the outline. Arrange and rearrange the sequence of your headings if necessary, as your thinking develops.

The object of this exercise is to arrive at the point where you have a clear, ordered, point-form skeleton of your argument that you can follow as you write. It should also create content discipline, with all the sub-points under every point grouped together so that they will appear in your written text together. If they do, you will avoid making your reader search the essay for the elements supporting any point you make, or for the implications of a point. All

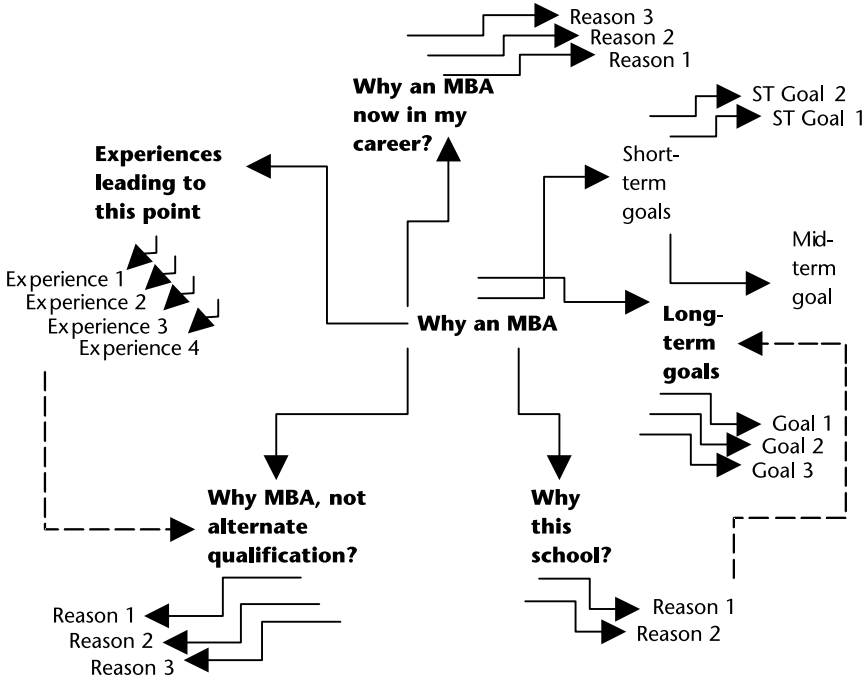

Figure 12.1 Visual map of an argument outline.

the supporting or following information will be right there, attached to the point.

Talk your outline out loud

An outline should make sense on its own. You should be able to speak it out loud. For example: 'First I'm going to look at my long-term goal of starting an action leisure company in Montreal; then I'm going to talk about my past experiences in leisure and travel consulting and entrepreneurial orientation that lead me to want to achieve this goal at this stage. Then I'm going to talk about my route to that goal after graduation, focusing on innovations in kite-boarding that will help me successfully launch the business. I will follow this by demonstrating why I need an MBA to fulfil my path. Finally, I'll explain why this specific program is the best one for me and my career plan.'

Signposting

There are two advantages in using a clear structure. First, it organizes you and helps you keep the bits together that should be together and marshal them in the direction of your argument. Second, it helps the reader know exactly how you are answering the question. You signal the presence of your clear and beautifully structured thought to the reader by signposting – raising markers in the road that spell out to the reader what is coming up and how it is organized, so that he is driving with a clear mental picture of the road ahead and can tell at a reassuring glance where each part of your answer is and what order things are coming in. Signalling the reader where you are going is not a 'nice-to-have' element. It is an absolute 'must-have'.

There is a caveat. Longer essays and articles have the luxury of formal signposting, for example: 'I intend to deal first with the arguments for and against genetically modified foodstuffs, followed by a consideration of how scientific development in the field is changing the balance between these arguments . . .' But in a 500-word essay you simply don't have the space. You have to imply the signposting, more or less as newspaper columnists do it – suggesting what you will cover and where you are going next, without wasting words saying it.

For example, you may start your success essay by saying: 'My most important professional success could not be more different from my greatest personal success, but they are equally significant in explaining who I am.' The reader is then ready for a structure where you deal with the professional, then the personal, and then compare and contrast them. In mid-essay you may signal your move from a professional example to the personal one by starting a paragraph: 'In the personal realm, . . .' It signposts the break without labouring the point or wasting words. Where possible, it's good practice to make the first sentence of every paragraph signal what's coming in that paragraph.

Given the tight MBA essay word limits, you will greatly help your cause if you stay within commonly used structures, such as those shown above, which will be the kind the reader is expecting and which will therefore require a minimum of active signposting.

Thesis statement

The thesis is the core of your argument. It is the reason you write the essay or the fundamental point you want the reader to get. It is the proof that you want to prove. At the end of Chapter 10, we discussed the benefit of writing a mission statement for each essay – that is, a sentence or two that contains the focus of the essay and encapsulates your primary purpose in writing it. This

should now be reworded and find its way into your final text as your thesis statement. In other words, your thesis statement rewords the essay mission statement for public consumption.

For example, the essay mission statement from Chapter 10 above was: 'I will show how I demonstrated initiative by discussing the day I stepped in as an emergency producer on a live TV show. I'll discuss the leadership qualities and creativity under pressure that were required, and state my other main strengths: cool head, adaptability, mental toughness and maturity.' A thesis statement from this could be: 'Leaders need to be creative, adaptable and mentally tough, as I learned the day I had to take over as an emergency producer on "TV Live". I know what's required and I have demonstrated these qualities.'

Another example of a thesis statement (for the 'Why an MBA?' essay) is: 'My success and promotion in the fixed income division of Morgan Stanley has reaffirmed my ambition to be a CFO in a large multinational firm. At this stage, to proceed along that path, I need an MBA from a top financial school such as the Chicago School of Business.'

Try to avoid labouring your thesis statement, for example by saying: 'The purpose of this essay is to . . .' or 'In answering this question, I will attempt to . . .' If you need this kind of scaffolding, use it, but then take it down afterwards.

It is possible to write a good essay without a thesis statement, but unless you are very practised at focusing and signposting your message, the lack of an identifiable thesis may lead to a meandering essay. Use the thesis statement to keep strict tabs on your area of focus and to limit the scope of your stories and analysis. It should guide you by helping you to figure out whether a point ought to be included or deleted. The thesis statement will also help to stop you trying to throw too much information at the reader.

The prominence of your thesis statement for you and for the reader may also be influenced by the kind of essay you are writing. If your line of reasoning is clear (e.g. this is my personal success and my professional success, followed by why they are important to me), then you need a formal thesis statement less. But if you are weaving a tapestry of ideas, moving across topics and across different periods in your life, a prominent thesis statement inserted early in the essay will help you place the pieces still to come, and help the reader to follow your trajectory.

13 Writing a first draft

You have your profile. You have your themes and message. You've picked your first school and you understand the question archetypes you face in the essay set. You've parcelled your message up per question, you've outlined and structured your essays and you've written an essay mission statement. You understand the basics of better writing and what's required of the introduction, middle and conclusion. It's time to start writing.

With all these mechanisms in place, you really can't go too far wrong. The nets you have created will catch you and bring you back to the task at hand. So relax and let the muse do her work. Don't edit, and don't fuss style or elegance – this is just a first draft after all. There will be lots of time to sharpen and polish later. Just get going, let the words come and record them. Give yourself a chance to get some flow: write as fast as you can in one uninterrupted sitting. It should take you ninety minutes or more per essay, working quickly, to get a draft down. Write at least one-and-a-half times the stipulated essay length – double is even better – so you will have something to cut.

Where do I start?

The most common problem at the writing stage is getting going. Applicants know what to do but still say: 'I don't know where to start!' Contrary to the advice in *The Sound of Music*, the beginning is a bad place to start. In fact, leave the beginning for the very end. When you sit down in front of a blank screen, write 'Intro' and press the 'Enter' key a few times. Get on with the rest of the essay. The introduction will come to you as you write the body of the text – and even if it doesn't, you will still be in a better position to write it when the rest of the draft is complete.

If you have not done so, create your essay thesis statement – the point or points you are trying to make. Jot it down in a couple of lines. This should give you something to focus around and direct your points towards. Then start

with the easiest thing to write, which in most essays is the story part. Once you have the story down, you will be ready to write the analysis and implications, anticipating questions and counter-arguments. Integrate this with the thesis statement. Use the guidance in the essay archetype section above to make sure you are covering the ground adequately. Then recheck your outline to see which bits you still need to do. When the body is done, write your conclusion and introduction.

The introduction

Whatever structure you choose, your essay will need an introduction that grabs the reader and introduces the central argument; followed by a body of about four or five paragraphs (for a 500-word piece) that develops the argument; followed by a conclusion. The following sections provide tips on how to deal with each part.

The introduction is the most important paragraph in your essay for two reasons. First, first impressions count. If you start loosely and sound confused or unconvincing, it is almost impossible to come back, no matter how good the rest is. Second, reader attention falls away rapidly. Just about everyone who sets out to read a piece will start at the beginning. Then, depending on their attention span and the value they perceive themselves as getting, they go on to paragraph two, or they skip further ahead, or their mind wanders, or they stop reading altogether.

Journalists are well schooled in the following algorithm: if K number of readers read the first paragraph, only $K/2$ will read the second, and the numbers fall away exponentially further into the story. The first paragraph is the sole opportunity to entice reader attention for the duration of the piece.

Start with the interest

The only way to write an interesting introduction is to start with the first interesting thing. In the movies you don't see the guy getting out his address book, looking up the number, calling it, getting a voicemail, leaving a message and then getting called back. The scene starts with the conversation. Similarly, when you pick your start, start when interesting things begin and not a moment before. Don't 'warm up' the reader with prefaces, histories and explanations. Your 'interest' doesn't have to be action, but it must be rich in content. If you have to go back and explain something, do it *afterwards*, in paragraph two.

There are four basic forms of introduction:

Mirror introduction

This type of introduction directly reflects the question and often reproduces it verbatim. For example, in a leadership essay that asks you for two significant leadership experiences, you might say: 'The two leadership experiences I value most are . . .' or 'I was a leader among my peers many times while growing up. The following two occasions most clearly point to my leadership potential . . .'

The advantage of the mirror approach is that it is clear and unmistakable. The disadvantage is that it can be pedestrian and the same as everyone else's. The admissions officer will read this introduction many times. This is not in itself a problem, but be sure to get off the launch pad and into the story as rapidly as possible.

Didactic introduction

A didactic introduction is one that seeks to situate the reader in the topic and convey the scope and main points of the message to come. It will contain no surprises and will often be a lead-in to a story. For example: 'When thinking about strategies for success, I think primarily of two things: a tough resolve to achieve and prudent flexibility in decision-making. I learned these lessons in December last year, and as I think of the event of that day my palms start to sweat all over again. I was in the boardroom, briefing various vice-presidents and section heads when . . .'

The advantage of the didactic introduction is that it allows you to begin in a clear, balanced way, without the crutches of parroting the question. It opens up the topic, introduces the main idea and suggests one or more of the threads that will be followed, as well as why this is going to be interesting and valuable. The disadvantage is that, if it is not tightly written, it can be preliminary waffle that the reader loses patience with. It is the hardest type of introduction to write well.

Action-drop introduction

This introduction drops the reader into the middle of the action in a story. In a leadership essay, it might look something like: 'We had a compass, but it was broken, and we were down to an inch of water in the jerry-can. There were no flares. The cellphone batteries were dead. Maureen wasn't complaining but after sharing the last packet of M&M's, I knew it was time to take a few calculated risks . . .'

The advantage of this type of introduction is that you plunge right into the vein of the story. There's no wind-up, no prevarication. You pull the reader into the drama, and the narrative tension and promise of resolution keeps him reading. We all read to find out 'what happened next', and the admissions officer is no exception. Once immersed, the reader will stay immersed unless you mess it up. The disadvantage of this introduction is that you don't have the scaffolding and inherent signposting of other types of introductions. You

have to work harder in the middle parts of the essay to create the sense of argument that your reader needs to understand how and why the action is relevant to your claim on a place in business school.

Cute introduction

This covers any other form of introduction – a quotation, a rhetorical question, a startling statistic, a chunk of poetry, and so on. You might start it something like: 'Are leaders born or made? If made, what is this secret alchemy? If intelligence and creativity harden on the anvil of experience in some, but not in others, why not? My life has given me a unique vantage point to answer this question, because . . .'

If you have a quotation or an epithet you live by, use it. It will get you noticed, but try not to do it more than once per application. It won't take long before the committee gets nervous about you.

The body

Inverted pyramid

Amateur writers expect to be read from start to finish. Professional writers don't. One solution that the pro's – journalists in particular – have developed is to write the most important things early and then, if the reader turns the page, well, at least the most important things have been said. This is called the 'inverted pyramid' (the biggest stuff is at the top). This technique also greatly respects the reader's time. You don't make her wait until *you* are ready to tell her the most important information. You just spill it. People who sell products for a living, however, generally take the opposite tack: taking great care to observe the niceties of warm-up, build-up and suspense. Verbal storytellers and speechmakers (who often have a captive audience) are also well served by the techniques of suspense.

Both modes work, and the choice is up to you. Just remember it is okay to strike early with the things you absolutely want the reader to know and to let the supporting data and explanations trail behind. At first it might feel unnatural, but you'll soon get used to it. This way you will have made no assumptions that, when you do finally pull your rabbit out of the hat after 483 words, your reader will still be in a good mood.[5]

Paragraphing

The body of your essay is all the steps between introduction and conclusion. It includes all the stepping-stones in your argument as you lead your reader across the river to your position. Each paragraph is a step that contains and binds together elements of information that need to be delivered together, at

each stage of the argument. The conventional wisdom is that paragraphs should express one idea only, and as soon as you go onto the next idea you should start a new paragraph. This is appropriate for long-form writing. The MBA essay is too short and dense a beast, with each sentence working too hard, to follow this rule. However, by convention and reader expectation, paragraphs signal the beginning of a new idea or a new step in the argument. They let the reader know when new stuff is coming, or when you are changing direction. You should be aware of this and try where possible not to have two major ideas in a paragraph. One idea and some supporting observations is the expected protocol.

One way to solve this dilemma in the MBA essay is to have short paragraphs – at a push a sentence can even be a paragraph, particularly if it is an important sentence that you want to draw attention to. Paragraph breaks are a personal choice: there is no right and wrong. But if you keep them on the short side, it is also easier to give the impression of a well-organized essay. Long paragraphs can make an essay appear meandering and confused. Tight paragraphing promotes discipline in thinking and writing, and discipline is what the admissions reader wants from you.

Transitions

As you move from one paragraph to the next, your reader – who is always on the lookout for structure and direction – will be asking: Why does this paragraph follow the one before? How does this link into the chain of the argument? The first sentence of every paragraph should provide a clear transition from the previous paragraph to the current one. Transition words help you do this by creating relationships between an idea that has ended and one that is about to begin, telling the reader how the new paragraph adds, changes, extends, compares, contrasts or otherwise relates to the previous one. Control of your transitions will give your essay cohesion and the sense that the information is all going in one direction. Transition words include 'however', 'in addition', 'furthermore', 'nevertheless', 'additionally', 'notwithstanding', 'another'.

A transition can also come in the form of a phrase, for example: 'Later that day' or 'It was to be expected that.' Or transitions can come in a sentence, such as: 'Nothing would have prepared us for what happened the next morning.' The main categories of transitional phrases are:

- *To show time and sequence*: meanwhile, eventually, soon, later, first, second, then, finally, also, besides, furthermore, moreover, in addition.
- *To compare and contrast*: likewise, similarly, in the same way, however, nevertheless, still, on the other hand, on the contrary, even so.

- *To show cause and effect*: therefore, as a result, accordingly, consequently, thus, hence, otherwise.
- *To offer examples and conclusions*: for instance, for example, after all, in fact, of course, in conclusion, in other words, on the whole, in short.
- *To show the result of an argument*: therefore, in summary, consequently, thus, the effect of this was, as a result of this.

If paragraphs flow naturally together you may not need a transition word, but mostly you do. If you are having serious trouble connecting two paragraphs, and no transition word comes to mind, then the paragraphs probably don't belong together. Rework the outline.

The conclusion

The last sentence or two of your essay are the trickiest. You need to leave the reader with a final positive impression, and take this last chance to reinforce those key things you want the reader to have extracted from the text. The difficulty in concluding an MBA essay is that standard essay-concluding technique, which involves repeating and drawing together the main points, is not appropriate for such a short piece. It's silly to reiterate a point you made only moments ago. Given drastic space limitations, you will mostly have to settle for a one- or two-sentence ending that does not summarize.

These final sentences can make the main point of the essay if you have not done so already, or they can situate the key points of your particular essay within your application message as a whole. It sometimes works to return to the issue or problem posed in the introduction, showing what has been gained in the argument since then – that is, showing the reader that a river has in fact been crossed.

Generally, the temptation is to overwrite the conclusion, winding the essay up towards a grand summarizing flourish by trying to tie up the insights in one perfect phrase. Stop yourself from going for something like: 'In conclusion it can be seen that the lessons I learned from my father, and my travel experiences in Indonesia, and my experiences at Accenture all come together at the right time to make me ready to . . .' It's never subtle and it is often excruciating.

On the other hand, you don't want to end abruptly, leaving your reader pressing the scroll-down button wondering if the computer system dropped some of the copy. Rely on your structure to help you. If it is strong and follows a natural, obvious pattern, then your arrival at your conclusion will be a clear and expected event. As on a Ferris wheel, what goes out and up is expected to come around and back down.

Be careful to resist the trite 'philosophical' insight conclusions that are a

favourite of MBA applicants. If you find yourself saying something like, 'In conclusion I can say I have learned that my family and friends are the most important thing in my life' or 'I really believe that everything happens for a reason' or some such banality, sit on your hands until you can think of something fresh and self-differentiating to say.

Conclusion dos

- Synthesize, don't summarize. Move away from the specifics of your argument and towards general perceptions and implications. Frame your discussion within a larger context. Answer the question: 'So what?'
- If appropriate, look to the future. Leave the reader with your vision and a strong, clear sense of purpose and expectation of success.
- Reflect the introduction. This is not always possible, but where it is you can create a powerful sense of integration and cohesion. If, for example, you started your failure essay with an experience that went wrong, you could mention that you have the same experience coming up again soon, but your approach will be vitally different. In alluding to the opening paragraph, it sometimes works to echo its language or phrasing without, obviously, exactly repeating what was said before.
- Work in your themes and message. If several of your essays conclude with similar, subtly different but interlocking theme statements, collectively it will all start to add up in the reader's mind.

Conclusion don'ts

- Avoid winding-up phrases such as 'in conclusion', 'in summary', 'to conclude', 'in closing', etc. If you are one paragraph from the end of the page, your reader already knows you are concluding.
- Avoid the 'ta-dum' finale. Don't try to wind everything up into one final, flourishing phrase.
- Resist the trite, vacuous, insight summary.
- Resist the impulse to highlight your main points again. You don't have the space. If you do still have the space, you should have used it earlier on for something else.

Summary: the 'take-home' message

Successful communication leaves the reader in no doubt as to what the purpose of the communication was, and what she should walk away knowing. In

the short MBA essay, you don't have the space to underline your message, so you need to be even more careful about being clear the first time. Don't make the reader guess. Make it patently obvious to any half-conscious reader (even to a drunken orangutan) what your main points are. If, when the reader closes your file, your uniqueness, accomplishments, strengths and potential contribution to the school are not stamped on her forehead, you have not done your job. The test is to give your draft essay to someone else to read. When they have read it through once, ask them what the main points were. If you don't like what you hear, rewrite it.

A cooling period

You must always – always – have a cooling period between writing and editing, and between subsequent edits, and between editing and submitting. The longer you can afford the better, but it must be at least overnight. (Stephen King in *On Writing* claims to leave a newly written novel in the drawer for six weeks before reviewing it.) When you come back to your essay with a fresh eye and cool brain you will be able to catch errors, improve muddled phrasing and enhance flow. New ideas will come to you too. If you can stand the embarrassment, it's not a bad idea to read your essays out loud to judge the flow of it and to catch errors that your eye misses.

After cooling, if you have written a draft of the full essay set, read it as a set in the number order – that is, as the admissions reader is likely to. Check that the essays complement each other and add up to a coherent picture, that they do not overlap and repeat material, and that each contributes in its own clear way to you message, within the broader theme structure that you have defined. You should also check for holes in your story. As you read the essays, ask: 'What is missing?' Look out for any key piece of yourself or your background that you know so well you just assume it, but that needs to be explained to someone who doesn't know you so they can make sense of your material. It's hard to see this yourself: you may need to prevail on a friend to help you.

Further drafts: revising, rewriting . . . and re-rewriting

Once you have a first draft, you're only half of the way there. It is the nature of writing that it always takes much iteration and many stiff reviews to achieve greatness. All writing starts out rambling and wordy. Concision of thought and precision of expression come in editing: joining ideas that should go together, smoothing phrases and improving diction and word choice. Each rewrite you do should boil off some of the copy. The first rewrite should lose 25%, and subsequent rewrites perhaps 10% each. It is like reducing a sauce. Everything that remains will be stronger and sharper. This 'sweat equity'

principle of writing applies to the world's best writers. The more writing seems fresh and flowing, the more hours of careful revision it contains. Be ready for delays and don't get flustered when they happen.

The following is a likely course of events:

- Your first rewrite – your second draft – will probably still be oriented to content issues: what you say, what you omit, what you emphasize, what you put in the introduction and conclusion, and where you add your themes and message. You will also be improving the organization of paragraphs and flow of ideas.
- By the third draft, content elements will mostly be settled and you should focus on the finer points of structure and coherence. You will also be dealing with issues of sentence construction and expression.
- By the fourth draft, you should be mostly editing – tweaking a sentence here or there. The focus will be on clarity and style.

These are just general guidelines: depending on how quickly you work and the standard of finished product you are looking for, you may take less or more time. You are not finished until you have done a grammar check and proofread.

Everyone needs an editor

All good writers put their writing through external copy-editing and proof-reading. You should too. Not only will another reader find the small mistakes that you don't register because you are too preoccupied thinking about the content, but they will also be able to point out areas that are unclear (but perfectly clear to you because you wrote them). As the author you cannot ever adequately judge how you are coming across to the fresh reader.

If you have the luxury of having more than one editor checking your essays, pick people with different skills: go for a nitpicky type, an analytical type, a language buff, and so on.

Re-using material for other schools

There's no shame in it. Everyone does it. The upside of spending tens of hours getting your phrasing exactly right is that you can use it more than once. Just be smart about it. Any paragraph you lift from a previous application must pass these three tests:

- it must relate to the question exactly, and therefore might need serious tweaking;
- it must relate to the paragraphs immediately before and after it;
- it must relate to the argument you are in the process of making.

To best set yourself up to re-use material, it is helpful to do the application with the most extensive and demanding essay set first. (It is understandable if you are tempted to take your easiest and shortest first.) If you tackle the most comprehensive set first, you will have the maximum reservoir of completed prose to re-use. You will more often have the easier task of shortening and reworking than the harder one of thinking further and adding new stuff.

Assuming you are re-using material judiciously, however long it takes you to do your first set of essays, expect the second to take half of that, and the third and subsequent applications to take about a quarter of the time the first one took.

14 Improving expression: word and sentence strategies

This chapter provides techniques for wielding the knife as you go over your text in the quest for writing that is sharp, fresh and easy to read.[6]

Be brief

In the spirit of taking out the bits that readers skip, be ruthless in getting every superfluous word or phrase out of your writing. Cut every word that wastes space and blunts your message. Keep going over your text with a red pen looking for shorter ways to say each thing. When you are done, verbal fat should be gone and your text should feel tight and wiry: Homer Simpson will be turned into Lance Armstrong.

The following will help you to be brief:

Avoid redundant points

Check that each sentence adds something significant to what has been said before. If not, delete it. If something is obvious, don't say it. Once you've made a point, don't come around and make it again using other words in the following sentence. Make your point definitively the first time and move on.

Avoid redundant phrases

Sharpen sloppy, wordy phrases that pass when people talk loosely. For example, cut the phrases [in brackets]:

- 'The fact [of the matter] is . . .'
- 'The [end] result was . . .'
- 'I returned [each and] every phone call . . .'

Sometimes a redundant phrase can be replaced by a shorter, clearer word or phrase:

- 'I will finish my application [within a comparatively short period of time]' becomes 'I will finish my application soon.'
- 'I am applying for an MBA [due to the fact that] it will enhance my career mobility' becomes 'I am applying for an MBA because it will enhance my career mobility.'
- '[There is a chance that] I will take a finance course next year' becomes 'I might take a finance course next year.'

Don't start sentences that state your point of view by saying: 'I think that . . . /I believe that . . . /In my opinion . . .' If you are writing it, it is obviously what you think.

Avoid redundant words

Many sentences contain unnecessary words that repeat an idea already expressed. Delete them, and also delete words that readers can infer. For example:

- 'At first [glance] . . .'
- 'Varda and I bought [exactly] the same marketing book.'
- 'The [basic] fundamentals were . . .'
- 'The printer is [located] near [to] the computer.'
- 'This is done by [means of] inserting the buckle into the catch.'

Empty, abstract nouns such as 'nature', 'position', 'factor', 'character', 'condition', 'situation', 'aspect', 'consideration', 'degree', 'area' and 'case' can cause wordy redundancies, as the following examples show:

- 'His Gmat is [of a] satisfactory [nature].'
- 'Her mentor is not [in a] prominent [position].'
- 'I am now [in the situation where I am] able to begin my essays.'

Sometimes a sentence needs to be re-jigged to get rid of the empty noun. For example: 'Student demand is rising [in the area of] online services' could be rewritten as 'Student demand for online services is rising' or 'Students are demanding more online services.'

Avoid tautologies

Tautologies contain redundant repetition of your point. For example: 'It was a [false] delusion that caused me to make some early career mistakes.'

Avoid unnecessary prepositional phrases. Often you can shorten 'from', 'of' and 'by' constructions. For example: 'It was necessary to stop people [from] cheating.'

Sometimes turning the construction into a possessive clause will help simplify it. For example: 'The opinion of the working group' or 'The opinion put forward by the working group' can be rewritten simply as 'The working group's opinion.'

Avoid empty qualifiers and modifiers

Don't use 'somehow', 'somewhat', 'rather', 'probably', 'quite', 'considerably', 'absolutely', 'possibly', 'totally', 'utterly' or similar empty words to qualify your statements. For example:

- 'I was so [totally] obsessed with my grades that I became [utterly] self-absorbed.'
- 'He had [considerable] difficulty recognizing the [absolutely] critical nature of the situation.'

Besides bulking up your copy and slowing down the reader, overuse of modifiers also makes you appear diffident.

Avoid overuse of constructions using the verb 'to be'

Including 'be', 'am', 'are', 'is', 'was', 'were', 'will be' and 'could be', which often also throws the sentence into the passive voice. For example:

Don't say: 'It *was* my low quantitative Gmat result that persuaded me to retake the test.'
Say: 'My low quantitative Gmat result persuaded me to retake the test.'

Don't say: 'There *will be* indications of how admissions officers *are aware* which essays are bought on the Net.'
Say: 'Admissions officers will indicate how they know which essays are bought on the Net.'

Don't say: 'His results were indicative of a person likely to succeed.'
Say: 'His results indicated a person likely to succeed.'

Avoid 'that'

There are times when you need 'that' in your sentence. But check every time whether you can leave it out, for example: 'Read the new book [that] I bought.'

Tight words and sentences should change your prose style from a meandering waffle to a tightly packaged message, which is right for admissions officers who are smart, busy people with little time to waste. Your essay should feel efficient and to-the-point – businesslike, if you like.

However, brevity does not mean writing short, choppy, simplistic sentences (and never, ever resort to shortened 'military-speak'). You must still write plain English, with varied sentence lengths and structure and enough description and elegance to satisfy the reader. It's okay to use words, just don't waste them. The essay should appear brisk, not clipped.

On lists

One way to keep your copy lean is to list items. There is some debate on whether to use bullet points in MBA essays – that is, whether the test of the essays also strictly includes a test of your ability to express yourself in discursive paragraphs only. This will probably depend on the prejudices of the individual reader. To play it safe, don't overuse bullet points. However, you can still use 'first, second, third', etc., to make the points in a multipart argument clear.

Use everyday language

Don't use fancy Latinate, multi-syllabic, abstract words. You are not applying for an MLitt. The top of your vocabulary register should be no higher than that which you would use in everyday speech in a reasonably formal environment such as the office. For example:

- Say 'stop' not 'desist from'
- Say 'after' not 'subsequent to'
- Say 'aware' not 'sentient of'

If you consult a thesaurus, do not pick a word unless you use it often. Do not use a word you have to look up in the dictionary after you find it in the thesaurus. You risk sounding like a phony, even if you use the word correctly, and certainly if you use it wrongly. At the other end of the spectrum, don't use slang or jargon. Say 'She was affected by the decision' not 'She was impacted by the decision.' Also, avoid technical terms, or be very careful to explain them. The classic test is: if your grandma wouldn't understand it, it's too technical.

Don't make any assumptions about what the admissions officer knows about technology or business. That's not their job.

Write in the active voice

Use the active voice every time, unless there's a good reason not to. That is, your character should be the subject of the verb, as in: 'I arranged the student conference' not 'The student conference was arranged by me.' The active voice does five things for your essay. First, it reduces words and adds briskness. Second, it is clearer. Third, it is more direct. Fourth, it is more personal: you are obviously present in the story. Fifth, it makes your agency more obvious. For example:

> *Passive*: 'While I was at business school there was a significant improvement in my work ethic and the growth of my confidence was evident.'
> *Active*: 'While I was at business school my work ethic improved significantly and my confidence grew.'
>
> *Passive*: 'The bidding system for electives is thought by most students to be fair, but the drain on the IT system has been underestimated by the administration.'
> *Active*: 'Most students think the bidding system for electives is fair, but the administration has underestimated the drain on the IT system.'

Note that the passive voice ('The application was sent by the student') has the sentence structure: object–verb–subject. The active voice ('The student sent the application') has the structure: subject–verb–object.

There are times when the passive voice is appropriate. Use it when:[7]

- You don't know who did the action. Say 'Trespassers will be prosecuted' to imply this prosecution could be by the owner, by the police, or by another authority.
- Who does the action is self-evident. 'Interview appointments should be made as soon as possible' (by the candidate, of course).
- The agent of the action is unknown or unimportant. 'Every year, thousands of students are confused by the elective bidding process.'
- You want to emphasize the action rather than the agent. 'After a frantic search, the interview score sheet was found in the wrong filing cabinet.'
- You want to be tactful by not naming the subject. 'It appears the role of the references has been misunderstood.'
- To create an authoritative tone. 'No applications will be accepted after 11 January.'

Keep subject, verb and object close together

Readers like sentences where the subject quickly connects to a verb and the verb to its object. Be careful about placing subordinate clauses in the way, forcing readers to have to keep a lot of information straight in their heads while they read. Remember, the idea is that *you* work hard to make life easy for the reader. Rework the sentence to make causal links clear. This usually means moving all the complicating and modifying material that interrupts the flow of subject–verb–object to either the beginning or the end of the sentence. For example:

Blurred – subordinate clause in the middle: 'My references, because they were written in an impersonal, pompous style, did not make an impression on the admissions committee.'
Sharp –subordinate clause at the end: 'My references did not make an impression on the admissions committee because they were written in an impersonal, pompous style.'
Sharp – subordinate clause at the beginning: 'Because they were written in an impersonal, pompous style, my references did not make an impression on the admissions committee.'

Blurred – subordinate clauses in the middle: 'The faculty's decision to allow laptops in group exams, even if carried out in the next year, or, failing that, phased in over a number of years, will do little to stop people cheating.'
Sharp – subordinate clauses at the end: 'The faculty's decision to allow laptops in group exams will do little to stop people cheating, even if carried out in the next year, or, failing that, phased in over a number of years.'

If in doubt whether your subject, verb and object are close enough, apply the following test: Underline the first seven or eight words of a sentence. If in those words you don't see a character as subject of a direct verb, simplify your sentence construction.

Use more and better verbs

Put as many active verbs as possible into your copy. Verbs add action and move the story along. They help you to be direct. It is hard to equivocate when you use verbs, particularly in the active voice. Adjectives and adverbs don't move the story along in the same way, and they don't create the forward momentum that verbs do. In fact, mostly they just slow the reader down.

A common problem in non-professional writing is that the verbs are hidden as nouns or adjectives. For example, 'He will make a decision' hides 'He will decide.' This causes prose that feels long-winded and bureaucratic.

Extract verbs from nouns. For example:

- Say 'I conclude that . . .' not 'I have come to a conclusion that . . .'
- Say 'He specified that . . .' not 'He made the specification that . . .'
- Say 'The meter measures . . .' not 'The meter produces measurements of . . .'
- Say 'Tim analysed the situation' not 'Tim produced a situational analysis.'
- Say 'The hiring process must be evaluated' not 'An evaluation of the hiring process needs to be done.'

Similarly, extract verbs from adjectives:

- Say 'influenced' not 'was influential'
- Say 'glorifies' not 'is a glorification'
- Say 'prefer' not 'have a preference'
- Say 'appeared' not 'had the appearance'

Other examples include:

Hidden verbs: 'When the university made a decision to expand its library, it implemented the purchasing of more technical periodicals.'
Manifest verbs: 'When the school decided to expand its library, it purchased more periodicals.'

Hidden verbs: 'Because bottlenecks in the supply chain are damaging to business relationships, the decision of management was to expand the workforce.'
Manifest verbs: 'Because bottlenecks in the supply chain damage business relationships, management decided to expand the workforce.'

All verbs are not equal

In fact, many are washed out and should be avoided. Try to use verbs that still pack some punch. For example, it's not wrong to say, 'That day my brother arrived in his new car, a Mustang,' but it's still better to say something like, 'That day my baby brother slithered into the driveway in his new Mustang.'

Use conjunctions and pronouns

Conjunctions and pronouns help you to write more directly and naturally. They put different parts of a sentence in direct relationship and demand that you clearly commit to what that relationship is. This stops you from writing bureaucratic, impersonal prose. Conjunctions also let you place events in the order that is simpler for the reader – that is, going forward in time. For example:

Blurred: 'We missed the market despite having bought the consulting reports.'
Sharp: 'We bought the consulting reports *but* we still missed the market.'

Blurred: 'Their increase in revenues came about even though they reduced outlets.'
Sharp: 'They increased revenues *despite* reducing outlets.'

Pronouns

You will write better if you refer to people using ordinary personal pronouns, as you would when speaking. If you refer to yourself, say 'I' or 'me' or 'my,' not 'the author of these essays' or 'the writer'. When you refer to anyone else, say him or her or they, etc. This will help you avoid the evils of indirect speech, hidden verbs and other pomposities. For example:

Hidden pronoun: 'Examination of the evidence is necessary before the judge will be ready to make a decision.'
Manifest pronoun: 'The judge will need to examine the evidence before *he* can decide.'

Hidden pronoun: 'As there was no microphone, it was the speaker's position that the presentation should be cancelled.'
Manifest pronoun: 'As there was no microphone, the speaker thought *her* presentation should be cancelled.'

Watch parallelism

When you have a series of words, phrases or clauses, make sure their grammatical construction is congruent so that the reader can identify the linking relationship better. For example:

Not parallel: 'The candidate's goals include getting into Harvard, Baker scholar recognition, and a Goldman Sachs job.'
Parallel: 'The candidate's goals include getting into Harvard, being a Baker scholar, and getting a job with Goldman Sachs.'

Not parallel: 'Many applicants are not so much opposed to rejection as to no reasons being given.'
Parallel: 'Many applicants are not so much opposed to rejection as they are to the fact that no reasons are given.'

Improve clarity, avoid ambiguity

To get clear, unambiguous sentences avoid the following mistakes:

1. *Avoid noun pile-ups*. Too many nouns together are difficult to understand. One way to correct a noun pile-up is to change at least one noun to a verb.

   Don't say: 'I drafted a workplace relationship enhancement proposal.'
   Say: 'I drafted a proposal for enhancing workplace relationships' or 'I proposed enhancing workplace relationships.'

   Don't say: 'Bain has an interdepartmental gender bias evaluation program.'
   Say: 'Bain has an interdepartmental program to evaluate gender bias.'

2. *Avoid multiple negatives*. Multiple negatives are difficult for readers to understand. For example:

   Unclear: 'Less credit is withheld from previous Masters degrees that don't lack financial components.'
   Clear: 'The committee gives more credit to previous Masters degrees that contain financial components.'

3. *Avoid unclear pronoun references*. Be sure that your pronouns ('it', 'they', 'this', 'that', 'these', 'those' and 'which') or personal pronouns ('him', 'her', 'them', 'their', etc.) refer clearly to the noun they stand in for. For example:

   'As the professor is better at finance than accountancy, he prefers to teach it.' (Which one?)
   'Steve told Sean that no-one would take him away.' (Take who away?)

4. *Avoid unclear modifiers.* Place modifiers (constructions that modify or add to the information in a sentence) near the words they describe, and punctuate carefully. For example:

   'I booked a hotel on the beach called "The Robberg" ' (is that the name of the hotel or the beach?) should be 'I booked a hotel called "The Robberg" on the beach' or 'I booked a hotel on Robberg Beach.'

5. *Avoid imprecise use of words.* For example:

   'By predicting [anticipating] a weakness, you can emphasize countering strengths.'

6. *Avoid inadequate punctuation and over-punctuation.* Use commas and other punctuation as necessary to indicate relationships among ideas and sentence parts. For example, the following sentence has different meanings, depending whether commas are inserted:

   'The applicants who were Canadian received $500.'
   'The applicants, who were Canadian, received $500.'

On the other hand, too much punctuation makes writing difficult to read. For example:

> 'Field trips are offered, in several courses; such as operations management and organizational behaviour' is better written as 'Field trips are offered in several courses, such as operations management and organizational behaviour.'

7. Check for double-entendres. For example:

   'Shelly likes scuba diving more than Patrick.'
   'Drunk gets nine months in violin case.'
   'The mayor ordered the police to stop drinking and driving.'

Proofread to show your hunger (yes, hunger)

You are at the point where your essay is nearly ready to be submitted. Now check painstakingly for spelling, grammar, punctuation and typographical correctness. Remember that the spellchecker does not pick up incorrect word use or missing words, so it should be only your first line of defence. If you mean 'lose' but you write 'loose', or you mean 'breath' but you write 'breathe', the spellchecker will be useless to you.

Admissions readers uniformly despise even the smallest error, because it says you could not be bothered to check your work thoroughly. That means you are *not hungry enough* for a place. Bang, you're dead. Proofread as if your life depended on it because in admissions it does.

Conclusion

This book has outlined a method for creating a competitive business school application involving a series of steps in four phases. Section One develops a picture of what the admissions committees at top business school programs are looking for, and their basis for selecting candidates. This gives an idea of the culture of business schools themselves, how they work, what they are committed to providing to the school in the incoming class pool, and therefore the many considerations they have in admitting or rejecting applicants. Business schools want to (a) pick the candidates most likely to be successful at school and in the future, and (b) create diversity and peer learning opportunities among the class itself. To get in you need to hit both of these notes.

The next phase, covered in Section Two, gives candidates a way to critically understand the value in their own profile, and identify and extract the most important and persuasive parts – their key areas of competitive value – and consolidate them into clear application themes. Adequate, honest personal diagnostics and profiling is the difference between a generic applicant and an interesting one. The bottom line for the admissions committee is to feel they have 'met' and like the candidate, and they can only feel that if the candidate knows him or herself well enough to present candidly. You must do the work to find what's relevant, meaningful, different and memorable in your story, and frame this value within a profile message that is resonant with Adcom's needs.

Once you have a differential value profile, a clear strategic positioning and a compelling message, the lessons of Section Three are how to communicate this in the essays and interviews. Knowing the best way to advance your value package via the essay questions posed – what to say and which essay to say it in – requires a close understanding of the essay questions and what they are really asking you for. There are, in fact, only a limited set of question 'archetypes' and recognizing these is the key to understanding how to divide up a profile between them.

The fourth and final phase involves the nitty-gritty of actually writing the essays in a way that advances your prospects. The clearer your story is to you, the better you will write it. But many applicants have a well-worked valuable story and are still not able to tell it in a way that attracts and holds the reader (and inside the tight word allotment). This requires the techniques of essay structuring, brevity and writing craft outlined in Section Four.

The following is a summary of the most important keys to a good application. If you do nothing else, focus on these twelve things:

1. *Show self-knowledge*. The Greek Oracle at Delphi said 'know thyself' and this is the golden key to admissions. If you know who you are and where you're going, and why it requires an MBA, you're more than halfway to getting in. The profiling tool in this book is a quick and effective way to achieve this basic self-knowledge. If you don't clearly understand your strengths, weaknesses, achievements, preferences, goals and motivations, you'll end up looking and sounding like a generic candidate. Ding.
2. *Show past success*. In an ideal world, business schools would have the time to fully investigate the merits of each candidate who applies. In reality, they can't do this: they have to rely on your past successes and past people who testify to your successes (the referees) as a shorthand indicator of your future success.
3. *Show leadership experience and aptitude*. Leadership is the ability to motivate and coordinate the efforts of others towards a common goal. It is the key management skill and the key to management success. Wherever you have done this successfully so far in your life, the admissions committee should know about it.
4. *Prove it with evidence*. You think you're great, and you surely are. But your opinion is self-serving at best. What counts is the evidence. Any positive opinion of yourself you offer must be immediately backed with evidence. The strongest evidence is concrete: promotions, awards, etc. But stories and anecdotes will do the trick too.
5. *Position yourself away from the competitive categories*. Business schools have oversubscribed and undersubscribed categories. Bankers and management consultants will be common. Tibetan monks and ballet dancers will be under-represented. But even if you're not radically different, look for ways to emphasize the differences in your profile and so exit from the herd.
6. *Have clear, interesting, ambitious future goals*. Nothing turns Adcom off like a candidate who wants to become a consultant or doesn't know what he wants. They don't like to think you will waste their precious education. They want you to make a difference in the world in some unique and relevant (to you) way. Reassure them that you will do so by telling them exactly what this will be. Don't say too little. Seize the opportunity the essays present. If you give more than a muttered safety-first statement, you'll get more back. The reader can only get out what you put in.

7. *Focus on telling your story* and don't try to give them 'what they want to hear'. Candidates invariably get bent out of shape by trying to second-guess 'what Stanford needs' or 'what's hot at Kellogg', etc., and often neglect to say who they really are and where their own strengths lie. In fact, all schools are looking for a mix of strong candidates of all types and backgrounds (to achieve class balance). Therefore, their requirements are so similar as to be identical for all practical purposes. If you get your profile right, you can get in anywhere.

8. *Don't praise the school*. They are fully aware of their value and their charms. What they want to know is why *you* are valuable and how you will add value to them. Keep your comments about the school at the level of showing the fit between you and them – how the program will contribute to you and how you will contribute to it.

9. *Don't try to be too competent*. Successful is good. Perfect is highly dubious. Particularly in your twenties, with just a few years of life and work experience behind you, you cannot have fully 'arrived' yet in any sense. If you are too good, not only is it suspicious, but you leave them no role to add to your skills and build your profile.

10. *Be personal*. Give Adcom real insight into your character, passion, personality and self-understanding. Don't think you can escape with the standard platitudes, keeping a cool, distant reserve. You won't fool anyone.

11. *Be unique*. How do you know if your statement of purpose is not unique? Easy: if what you say could be said by the next applicant or the one after that, it's generic. If what you say could only have been said by you, it's unique.

12. *Be likeable*. MBA applicants often walk around with the myth that they have to be industry tycoons-in-training to get into a good business school. Not so. A pleasant attitude and open, fair-minded, reflective values will take you much further. People always choose people they like as colleagues and co-workers and Adcom is no different.

Endnotes

1 Stanford MBA Admissions, June 2004: http://www.gsb.stanford.edu. See also http://www.gsb.stanford.edu/mba/ask/faqs.html for Stanford's extended guide to the applications evaluations process. Their approach to application evaluation is highly generalizable to all the top programs.

2 There are many excellent guides to behavioural questions and questioning, mostly to be found at job search sites, for example CareerJournal.com. For a representative piece, see Hirsch, A. (2005) Ace behavioral interviews by telling powerful stories (27 March): http://www.careerjournal.com/jobhunting/interviewing/20050201-hirsch.html.

3 Essay examples are selected for demonstration purposes from the real essays schools currently require, or have required in previous years.

4 There are many guides to better writing available for free on the Internet. For a collection of the best sources that apply to writing MBA essays, see www.mbastudio.net/tools.htm.

5 For a good discussion of the inverted pyramid, see Kasbekar, K. (2005) Inverted pyramids (16 March): http://www.prdomain.com/articles_journalists/pr_inverted_pyramids.htm.

6 This section has been adapted in part from materials made available to the author by TutorSuite, an academic support enterprise: www.tutorsuite.com.

7 Adapted from The Writing Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison (31 May 2005) http://www.wisc.edn/writing/Handbook/CCS_activevoice.html

Appendix: essay revision checklist

There are many things to check for as you revise and improve your essays. The following records just the essential questions you should ask yourself.

Profile

- Does this essay make me memorable? Have I put forward enough to be interesting, or am I still a face in the crowd?
- Are the main points about my profile clear? Is it clear why this profile would be unique and valuable to the school?
- Does this essay reflect me specifically, or could anyone else have written it? Does it open a window that gives genuine insight into me personally?
- Have I revealed distinctive, significant things about my values, choices and preferences? Or have I just made the right noises while keeping prying eyes at bay?
- Does this essay provide information about me that the rest of my file data and recommendations do not?
- Do the essays fit with the profile that comes through from the rest of the application?

Argument

- Have I answered the question? Does any piece of my answer not fit with the question?
- Is my message clear? Have I made a precise, logical argument for my candidacy which rests on points that are fully backed up? Have I provided a set of solid reasons as to why I deserve a place?
- Are my themes and highlights absolutely prominent, or did I play

cloak-and-dagger with the committee and try to make them guess the most important things about me?
- Do the essays in the set add up to one coherent image, and does each essay contribute in a clear way?
- Have I targeted the school exactly and in detail?
- Is anything (other than my themes) said twice? Are there any obvious or redundant statements?
- Are there contradictions or obvious gaps in the narrative or in my profile?
- Are my conclusions justified by the evidence and examples I present?

Structure and coherence

- Is the introduction engaging? Do I prepare the reader for what's to come?
- Is the conclusion appropriate to the introduction and the argument?
- Is there clear structure and signposting – have I helped the reader to know where I'm going before I get there?
- Are my ideas developed one at a time, each with supporting evidence as necessary?
- Does each paragraph relate to the question, and to the preceding and following paragraphs, and to the thrust of the essay as a whole? Or will I be caught having boiler-plated paragraphs from another application?
- Is my essay one unified argument? Do all parts contribute to the main argument, or are there tangents and digressions?
- Is the transition between paragraphs clear? Are there transitional words and phrases to connect the sentences, or do I lose the reader as I progress through the essay?

Expression

- Have I been brief and to the point?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my tone consistent?
- Have I varied my sentence structure and length?
- Do I use stories and imagery? Did I just tell the reader what it was like, or did I take him there?
- Have I allowed a tired old cliché or an inappropriate word choice to slip through?
- Have I used details, numbers, facts and other specifics wherever possible?

- Have I deleted every unnecessary word, every unnecessary modifier, every redundant phrase?
- Have I deleted obvious points that can be inferred?
- Are the mechanics of my writing perfect? Have I knocked out all spelling and typographical errors?

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