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SOP and Essay Writing for MBA Admissions: Structure, Mistakes and 3 Outlines

How to write an MBA statement of purpose and on-the-spot essays: a word budget, writing rules, common mistakes and three outlines you can adapt.

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What you are writing, and why formats vary

Two kinds of writing turn up in MBA admissions. A statement of purpose (SOP) or application essay is prepared at home and edited for days. A written-ability test (WAT) or on-the-spot essay is written in a fixed time on a topic you see for the first time.

Each school, whether ISB, XLRI or an IIM, sets its own written task, if it asks for one. Prompts, word limits, time limits and weightage change from one cycle to the next, so this note quotes none of them. Before you write anything, read the current application guidelines of each school and follow them exactly. This note teaches structure and habits, which carry across formats.

The SOP spine and a word budget

A good SOP answers six questions in order: who are you, what have you done, why an MBA, why this school, what next, and how does it all connect. Budget words before you write, so the middle does not swallow the ending.

Part	Words (500-word SOP)	Job
Hook	60	One scene or fact that shows what you care about
Journey	140	Two achievements with numbers, and one thing you could not do alone
Why an MBA	100	The specific skill gap and why work alone will not close it
Why this school	90	Two specifics: a course, a lab, a club, a faculty area
Goals	70	A short-term role and a long-term aim, linked to your past
Close	40	Return to the hook and say what you will bring

Example. The school gives a 400-word limit. Rescale the 500-word budget.

1. Scale factor = 400 / 500 = 0.8.
2. Hook 60 × 0.8 = 48; journey 140 × 0.8 = 112; why an MBA 100 × 0.8 = 80.
3. Why this school 90 × 0.8 = 72; goals 70 × 0.8 = 56; close 40 × 0.8 = 32.
4. Check: 48 + 112 + 80 + 72 + 56 + 32 = 400.

Answer: 48, 112, 80, 72, 56 and 32 words

To reuse one SOP for several schools, keep the hook, journey and why-an-MBA parts and rewrite why-this-school and goals. That is 160 of 500 words rewritten, so about two thirds of the text carries over.

Sentence-level rules

- Show before you tell. Replace an adjective about yourself with the event that proves it.
- One idea per paragraph. If a paragraph has two ideas, split it.
- Use plain verbs: led, cut, built, wrote, taught. Avoid 'was responsible for'.
- Quote a number with its base: from what, to what, over how long.
- Use past tense for what you did and present or future for what you plan.
- Cut stock phrases: passionate about, since childhood, in today's fast-paced world.

Example. Rewrite this opening: I have always been passionate about business and leadership, and I believe an MBA will help me grow.

1. Diagnosis: no scene, no evidence, and the same sentence fits every applicant.
2. Fix: open with a specific moment, add a number and your action, then link it to your goal.
3. Illustrative rewrite (use your own facts): Last March the plant where I worked lost three days of production because its spare-parts list lived in one supervisor's notebook. I built the shared inventory sheet that fixed it, and I have wanted to build systems like that ever since.

Answer: A scene, a number and an action in two sentences, instead of a claim.

Example. Make this resume line concrete: Improved process efficiency by 20%.

1. Ask: from what, to what, how?
2. Order-processing time fell from 5 days to 4 after you merged two approval steps.
3. Check the percentage: (5 - 4) / 5 = 20%.
4. Second line: Reduced monthly vendor cost from ₹48,000 to ₹36,000. (48,000 - 36,000) / 48,000 = 25%.

Answer: Cut order-processing time from 5 days to 4 by merging two approval steps, a 20% reduction.

Three outlines you can adapt

Outline 1: career-switch SOP (for example, an engineer moving to product or operations).

1. Hook (60 words): a work scene that exposed a problem you want to solve.
2. Journey (140): two results with numbers; one case where you needed others.
3. Why an MBA (100): name the missing skill, such as finance or people leadership, and why the job cannot teach it fast enough.
4. Why this school (90): two specifics tied to your goal.
5. Goals (70) and close (40): the first role after the MBA, a longer aim, and a line back to the hook.

Outline 2: opinion essay written on the spot, such as Should gig workers get social security? Use a stance, even a balanced one. If your answer is 'it depends', state the condition.

1. Opening (2 sentences): the stance and the one idea behind it.
2. Argument 1: economic. Who gains, who pays.
3. Argument 2: practical. How it would work or fail in India.
4. Counter-view and your reply to it.
5. Close: the stance restated with a condition or a recommendation.

Example. Suppose the essay is allowed 20 minutes. How do you split the time?

1. Plan 3 minutes: stance, two arguments, one counter.
2. Write 14 minutes: one for the opening, three for each of the two arguments, three for the counter-view, two for the close, and two of slack (1 + 3 + 3 + 3 + 2 + 2 = 14).
3. Review 3 minutes: fix grammar, check the stance is clear, cut one weak sentence.
4. Check: 3 + 14 + 3 = 20.

Answer: 3 + 14 + 3 = 20 minutes. Adjust to the limit your school states.

Outline 3: failure or leadership essay. Spend most of the words on action and learning, not on the story of how things went wrong.

Example. Split a 400-word failure essay across situation, action, result and learning at 15%, 40%, 20% and 25%.

1. Situation: 0.15 × 400 = 60 words.
2. Action: 0.40 × 400 = 160 words.
3. Result: 0.20 × 400 = 80 words.
4. Learning: 0.25 × 400 = 100 words. Check: 60 + 160 + 80 + 100 = 400.

Answer: 60, 160, 80 and 100 words

The editing pass

Edit in four short passes, not one long one. Leave a day between the draft and the edit.

- ☐ Pass 1, content: does every paragraph earn its place against the word budget?
- ☐ Pass 2, proof: is there a number or a concrete detail in each achievement?
- ☐ Pass 3, language: shorten every sentence over 25 words; replace each stock phrase.
- ☐ Pass 4, read aloud: mark every place you stumble and rewrite it.
- ☐ Final check: can you defend every line in an interview? Cut what you cannot.

Mistakes that sink an essay

Watch out. Anything you write can become an interview question. Never exaggerate a result, a title or a team size.

- Writing a resume in paragraph form instead of telling one or two stories.
- Spending half the words on school and college and none on the future.
- Naming a school's rank or fame as the reason to join it, instead of a specific course or faculty.
- Ignoring the question asked and pasting a pre-written essay.
- Ending with a vague line such as 'I look forward to the opportunity'. End on your contribution.
- Going over the word limit or under the time without checking the instructions.

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