

MARVIN E. ROBINSON SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT

ADMISSIONS ASSESSMENT — STUDENT WRITING REFERENCE & STUDY GUIDE

SBM ADMISSIONS WRITING ASSESSMENT GUIDE (30-POINT SCALE)

ASSESSMENT PARAMETERS AT A GLANCE:

- **Target Applicants:** 8th & 9th Grade SBM Applicants
- **Time Allotted:** 15 Minutes Reading & Annotating | 50 Minutes Writing
- **Total Weight:** 30 Points (Scored across 5 analytic domains)

IMPORTANT NOTICE REGARDING ONSITE ASSESSMENT CASES:

The Blockbuster case study included in this guide is **strictly a practice example** to help you understand the format, questions, and grading rubrics. On the day of your official onsite assessment, **you will experience a different business company case**. You do not need to memorize facts about Blockbuster or any specific company!

1. WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Welcome to the SBM Writing Assessment! This guide contains everything you need to understand how the writing test works, how your answers will be graded, and what strong student responses look like.

- **No Prior Business Knowledge Required:** You do not need to know business jargon, economics, or financial formulas. Everything you need to answer the questions is provided inside the case documents given on test day.
- **No "Single Right Answer":** Business leaders often face tough choices where different options have good and bad sides. You can make any recommendation you want, as long as you explain *why* using evidence from the provided case documents.
- **Roleplay & Case Timeframe:** You will be placed in the role of a business advisor at a specific historical point in time. Readers evaluate your work based strictly on the information provided in the case materials.
- **Spelling & Grammar Policy:** You are graded on the clarity and logic of your ideas. Minor spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors will not lower your score unless the reader cannot understand what you mean.

2. OFFICIAL 30-POINT SCORING RUBRIC (DOMAIN PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTORS)

Your complete set of 5 answers is evaluated together across **5 core scoring domains (30 Points Total)**. Below are the exact performance standards graders use:

DOMAIN 1: ANALYSIS & EVIDENCE (7 POINTS MAX)

SCORE	LEVEL	PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTOR (WHAT GRADERS LOOK FOR)
6–7	Advanced	Identifies central issues accurately. Selects relevant facts, figures, and data from multiple documents and uses them purposefully to support ideas. Explains what evidence means and recognizes meaningful patterns.
4–5	Proficient	Demonstrates a clear understanding of main issues. Uses relevant evidence from documents to support ideas and generally explains why evidence matters. Makes reasonable connections among facts.
2–3	Developing	Partial understanding of the case. Identifies some evidence but relies heavily on summary or description rather than explaining its significance. Connections between facts and conclusions are incomplete.
1	Limited	Limited understanding. Uses little relevant evidence, misunderstands facts, or makes claims unsupported by documents.
0	No Evidence	Provides no meaningful evidence of analysis or case use.

DOMAIN 2: CRITICAL THINKING (7 POINTS MAX)

SCORE	LEVEL	PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTOR (WHAT GRADERS LOOK FOR)
6–7	Advanced	Develops clear, well-connected reasoning throughout. Explains how ideas, problems, and solutions relate. Recognizes meaningful tradeoffs, advantages, disadvantages, and risks . Conclusions follow logically.
4–5	Proficient	Develops generally clear and logical reasoning. Explains important relationships among evidence, problems, and solutions. Recognizes relevant tradeoffs and risks. Conclusions are reasonable and supported.
2–3	Developing	Demonstrates some logical reasoning but does not consistently connect ideas. Recognizes some advantages/disadvantages but explains them only partially.
1	Limited	Little sustained logical reasoning. Ideas are disconnected, contradictory, or based largely on unproven assertions.
0	No Evidence	Provides no meaningful evidence of critical or logical thinking.

DOMAIN 3: CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING (6 POINTS MAX)

SCORE	LEVEL	PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTOR (WHAT GRADERS LOOK FOR)
5–6	Advanced	Develops multiple meaningful and distinct, practical solutions to the problem. Ideas are thoughtful, relevant, and developed enough to show how they work. Demonstrates purposeful flexibility.
3–4	Proficient	Develops more than one reasonable response. Ideas address case challenges and include enough explanation to show how they help. Solutions are distinct and workable.
2	Developing	Offers at least one relevant response, but alternatives are similar, vague, or largely restate actions already in the case.
1	Limited	Offers a minimal, vague, or impractical response with little independent problem solving.
0	No Evidence	Provides no meaningful evidence of creative problem solving.

DOMAIN 4: WRITTEN COMMUNICATION (6 POINTS MAX)

SCORE	LEVEL	PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTOR (WHAT GRADERS LOOK FOR)
5–6	Advanced	Communicates ideas clearly and effectively with purposeful, logical organization . Responses are easy to follow and developed in a logical order. Spelling/grammar errors do NOT interfere with meaning.
3–4	Proficient	Communicates clearly overall with reasonable organization. Most responses are easy to follow. Language/mechanical errors may be present, but student meaning remains understandable.
2	Developing	Communicates basic ideas, but organization or expression is inconsistent. Responses may be repetitive or loosely organized.
1	Limited	Communication is consistently difficult to understand due to organization or expression problems.
0	No Evidence	Provides too little written communication to evaluate.

DOMAIN 5: APPLICATION & JUDGMENT (4 POINTS MAX)

SCORE	LEVEL	PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTOR (WHAT GRADERS LOOK FOR)
4	Advanced	Makes a clear, defensible recommendation. Thoughtfully weighs alternatives, consequences, and risks. Considers how the decision affects key stakeholders (employees, customers, managers, community) .
3	Proficient	Makes a reasonable recommendation that addresses the situation. Considers relevant consequences, risks, or affected stakeholder groups with sound judgment.
2	Developing	Makes a recommendation connected to the case, but considers consequences or affected groups in a limited way.
1	Limited	Makes a weakly supported recommendation with little consideration of consequences or stakeholder groups.
0	No Evidence	Provides no meaningful evidence of application or judgment.

3. SAMPLE CASE PACKET & ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS (PRACTICE EXAMPLE)

PRACTICE CASE EXAMPLE — BLOCKBUSTER AT A CROSSROADS (DECEMBER 2004):

Imagine it is December 2004. You have been hired as a business advisor to Blockbuster's leadership team. Blockbuster is the largest movie-rental company in the world, with over 9,000 neighborhood stores. However, new technologies and mail-order competitors like Netflix are changing how people rent movies. Blockbuster must decide how to adapt.

DOCUMENT A — BLOCKBUSTER IN 2004

In December 2004, Blockbuster is one of the world's largest movie and video-game rental companies. It operates approximately 9,100 stores in the United States and other countries. Blockbuster's traditional business is built around neighborhood stores where customers select, rent, and return movies. While stores allow immediate movie access, overall rental revenue declined in 2004 as new rental formats gained popularity.

DOCUMENT B — TWO WAYS TO RENT MOVIES

By 2004, Blockbuster competed with Netflix (founded 1997), which offered DVD-by-mail rentals. Netflix customers ordered online, received DVDs by mail, paid a monthly subscription fee, and had no due dates or late fees. Blockbuster relied on in-store individual rentals with physical returns and traditional late fees.

DOCUMENT C — WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

Total Revenue (2002–2004): Blockbuster grew from \$5.57B (2002) to \$6.05B (2004). Netflix grew rapidly from \$153M (2002) to \$506M (2004).

Blockbuster In-Store Rental Revenue: Declined from \$4.53B in 2003 to \$4.43B in 2004.

DOCUMENT D — WHAT DO CUSTOMERS WANT?

Customers faced tradeoffs: Blockbuster offered immediate movie access, while Netflix offered home selection, massive catalog choice, and no late fees. In Dec 2004, Blockbuster announced it would eliminate traditional late fees starting Jan 2005.

DOCUMENT E — THE DECISION FACING BLOCKBUSTER

In Aug 2004, Blockbuster launched *Blockbuster Online* (mail subscription). Leadership must decide whether to focus on physical stores, invest heavily in online mail delivery, or integrate both into a hybrid system.

THE 5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- Identify the Central Problem:** What is the most important problem or challenge facing Blockbuster in December 2004? Explain the problem in your own words and cite evidence from the documents.
- Analyze the Evidence:** What evidence suggests the market is changing? Cite information from at least two different documents and explain why it matters.
- Develop Solutions:** Propose two distinct, practical actions Blockbuster could take. Explain how each helps and identify at least one risk or drawback for each.
- Evaluate and Recommend:** What do you recommend Blockbuster do? Support your decision with specific evidence and explain why it is stronger than an alternative.
- Consider the Bigger Picture:** Who else might be affected by your recommendation (e.g., store employees, managers, community)? Explain what leaders should consider regarding this stakeholder group.

4. FULL CALIBRATION EXEMPLARS & GRADER SCORING RATIOS

Below are the **three official anchor exemplars** in full detail. Read the full student text, domain score breakdowns (re-scaled to the 30-point rubric), and reader rationales to understand exactly how graders evaluate student writing!

EXEMPLAR A: Limited / Developing Anchor — Total Score: 13 / 30 Points

Question 1 Response: The biggest problem Blockbuster has is Netflix is becoming more popular and Blockbuster has to figure out how to compete with them. Netflix went from \$153 million in 2002 to \$506 million in 2004. This could become a bigger problem if Netflix keeps growing.

Question 2 Response: The market is changing because Netflix is making more money than before and people can order movies from their house. Blockbuster's rental revenue also went down from 2003 to 2004. This is important because Blockbuster could keep losing customers if people like Netflix better.

Question 3 Response: One thing Blockbuster could do is make its online service better and advertise it more. This could help because people would know they don't have to go to the store. The risk is it could cost a lot of money. Another thing they could do is lower their prices. People might choose Blockbuster because it is cheaper. The problem is Blockbuster would make less money on each rental.

Question 4 Response: I think Blockbuster should make its online service better because Netflix is growing really fast. Blockbuster already has an online service so they don't have to start completely over. They could advertise it and get more people to use it. I think this is better than lowering prices because lowering prices would make them less money. If they improve online they could compete with Netflix.

Question 5 Response: Employees could be affected. If Blockbuster changes to more online movies they might not need as many people working in the stores. Blockbuster should think about their employees and try not to fire a lot of people.

OFFICIAL GRADERS' SCORING RATIONALE (13/30 TOTAL):

- **Analysis & Evidence (3/7):** The basic competitive problem is understood and several facts are used accurately (\$153M to \$506M), but evidence is treated in isolation with little analysis of the larger pattern.
- **Critical Thinking (3/7):** Reasoning makes basic sense but remains simple and gives little attention to competing evidence or tradeoffs.
- **Creative Problem Solving (3/6):** Two relevant actions and risks are offered, but ideas are conventional and only briefly developed.
- **Written Communication (3/6):** Brief and simple, but consistently clear and understandable. Straightforward writing communicates effectively.
- **Application & Judgment (1/4):** Makes a recommendation and identifies an employee impact, but alternatives and long-term consequences receive little development.

EXEMPLAR B: Proficient Anchor — Total Score: 22 / 30 Points

Question 1 Response: Blockbuster's most important challenge is deciding how to adapt to changes in the movie-rental market without giving up the advantages it already has. Netflix is growing quickly and gives customers conveniences such as ordering movies from home and not paying traditional late fees. At the same time, Blockbuster is still much larger and has thousands of stores. The problem is not just that Netflix is a competitor. Blockbuster has to decide what parts of its current business are still valuable and what needs to change.

Question 2 Response: Document C shows that Netflix's revenue increased from \$153 million in 2002 to \$506 million in 2004. Blockbuster is still much larger, but its rental revenue decreased from \$4.53 billion in 2003 to \$4.43 billion in 2004. Document D also shows why customers might be attracted to a different rental system. Netflix customers can choose movies from home, return them by mail, and do not have traditional late fees. Together, this evidence suggests that the market is moving toward more convenience and flexibility. Blockbuster should be concerned because its traditional rental business could continue to decline even though the company is currently larger than Netflix.

Question 3 Response: One action would be to expand Blockbuster Online and connect it more closely to the stores. For example, customers could order movies online and have the choice to receive them by mail or pick them up at a nearby Blockbuster. This could give customers more convenience while also using Blockbuster's thousands of stores as an advantage Netflix does not have. A disadvantage is that creating the technology and coordinating the stores and online system could be expensive and complicated. A second action would be to improve the experience in Blockbuster stores. Blockbuster could make sure popular movies are available, make renting and returning faster, and offer subscriptions to customers who prefer going to a store. This could keep customers who like getting a movie immediately. The risk is that Blockbuster could spend money improving stores while more customers continue moving toward online services.

Question 4 Response: I recommend that Blockbuster expand its online service but combine it with its stores. Netflix is growing rapidly, which shows that Blockbuster needs to take online rentals seriously. However, Blockbuster has an advantage Netflix does not have because customers can get a movie immediately at thousands of locations. Instead of treating the stores and online business as two separate choices, Blockbuster could use them together. This is stronger than only improving the stores because the evidence shows that customer preferences are changing. It is also better than trying to copy Netflix completely because Blockbuster would be ignoring one of its biggest strengths. This plan would probably cost more and could be difficult to organize, but it gives Blockbuster a way to adapt while still using resources it already has.

Question 5 Response: Employees would be affected by this recommendation. Some employees might need to learn new jobs if stores start handling online orders or pickups. Some stores might also eventually need fewer employees if more customers rent online. Blockbuster should consider training employees for the new system instead of simply replacing them when possible. This could cost money in the short term, but employees who already know the company and customers could help make the new system work. Blockbuster still has to make changes to stay competitive, so protecting every job might not be possible.

OFFICIAL GRADERS' SCORING RATIONALE (22/30 TOTAL):

- **Analysis & Evidence (5/7):** Clear understanding and relevant evidence from several documents; explains why evidence matters and recognizes Blockbuster's existing strengths.
- **Critical Thinking (5/7):** Clear, connected reasoning recognizes important tradeoffs, including online convenience vs. immediate store access and investment costs vs. adaptation.
- **Creative Problem Solving (4/6):** Two distinct, workable strategies developed. The hybrid approach uses Blockbuster's store network rather than merely copying Netflix.
- **Written Communication (5/6):** Consistently understandable and well organized. Communication is effective and easy to follow.
- **Application & Judgment (3/4):** Defensible recommendation compared with alternatives, including costs, implementation difficulty, and retraining impacts on employees.

EXEMPLAR C: Advanced Anchor — Total Score: 28 / 30 Points

Question 1 Response: I think Blockbusters biggest problem is not Netflix by itself. The bigger problem is that the way customers want to rent movies is changing and Blockbuster has most of its success built around stores. Netflix is still much smaller, but it grew from \$153 million to \$506 million in only two years. At the same time Blockbusters rental revenue went down some from 2003 to 2004. This means Blockbuster has to change before its stores go from being its biggest advantage to being something that cost alot of money and customers dont use as much.

Question 2 Response: The numbers show two things that seem almost opposite. Blockbuster has about \$6 billion in revenue so Netflix is not close to being as big. But Netflix revenue more than tripled between 2002 and 2004 while Blockbusters rental revenue slightly went down. That does not prove Netflix will beat Blockbuster, but it shows the new type of renting is growing fast enough that Blockbuster should take it serious. The customer information also explains why this could be happening. Netflix lets people choose movies at home and they dont have regular late fees, but Blockbuster lets you get a movie right away instead of waiting on the mail. So customers are not just choosing one company over another. They are choosing between different kinds of convenience. Blockbuster needs to figure out how to give customers the new convenience without throwing away the advantage it already has.

Question 3 Response: My first idea would be make the stores part of Blockbuster Online instead of treating online like a seperate business. A customer could order online and choose mail or pick up the movie from a store. They could also return mailed movies to a store and maybe get the next movie there immediately. Netflix cannot do that because it doesnt have thousands of stores. The risk is it would probably be expensive to make all the computers and inventory work together and employees would need training. My second idea would be experiment before changing every store. Blockbuster could choose maybe 100 stores in different kinds of places and test different ideas like subscriptions, online pickup, different prices, or smaller stores. Then they could compare what customers actually use before spending money changing 9,100 stores. The disadvantage is testing takes time, and Netflix might keep growing while Blockbuster is figuring out the results.

Question 4 Response: I would combine the two ideas but make the first one the main strategy. Blockbuster should build one system where the website and stores work together, but test it in selected markets before changing the whole company. The reason is Blockbuster should not try to become Netflix. If it copies Netflix exactly then it is competing against a company that already knows how to do that business, and Blockbuster would not be using the thing Netflix does not have, which is thousands of stores. But Blockbuster also should not just protect the stores because its rental revenue is already starting to fall and Netflix is growing fast. Testing the system first reduces some risk. If customers dont use store pickup or returns then Blockbuster learns that before spending as much money. If customers do use it, they can expand it. This strategy could still fail because the stores cost alot to operate and customers might eventually prefer getting everything at home. But based on what leaders know in 2004, I think using the stores while testing how customer behavior is changing is better than assuming either stores or online will automatically win.

Question 5 Response: Employees would be affected but I think there is two sides to it. Changing the stores could cause some jobs to disappear especially if Blockbuster eventually needs less stores. That hurts employees and families now. The company should try to retrain workers for online orders, inventory, and customer pickup when that makes sense. But keeping every store open just to protect the jobs could also hurt employees later. If the company doesnt change and loses more customers, then the whole company could get weaker and even more people could lose jobs. So being responsible to employees does not always mean never cutting a job. I think Blockbuster should try to reduce the harm to workers while still making changes that give the company a better chance of surviving.

OFFICIAL GRADERS' SCORING RATIONALE (28/30 TOTAL):

- **Analysis & Evidence (7/7):** Recognizes tension between Blockbuster's size and Netflix's growth, connects quantitative and customer evidence from multiple documents, and identifies store network risk.
- **Critical Thinking (7/7):** Reasoning consistently recognizes uncertainty and competing considerations. Distinguishes what evidence suggests from what it proves.
- **Creative Problem Solving (5/6):** Integrated store/online model and limited-market testing strategy are purposeful, developed responses to specific case features.
- **Written Communication (5/6):** Ideas are clear, organized, developed, and easy to follow. Minor typos ("alot", "seperate") do NOT lower the score because meaning is clear!
- **Application & Judgment (4/4):** Outstanding recommendation weighing uncertainty, implementation risk, competitive strengths, and complex two-sided employee impacts.

5. STUDENT EXAM DAY STRATEGY CHECKLIST

STEP-BY-STEP EXAM DAY STRATEGY:

1. **15-Minute Reading Period:** Read the case introduction and documents carefully. Underline key numbers, data trends, and customer priorities.
2. **Domain 1 — Analysis & Evidence (7 pts):** Cite facts, data, and quotes from *multiple* documents to support your statements.
3. **Domain 2 — Critical Thinking (7 pts):** Explain your cause-and-effect reasoning clearly and weigh tradeoffs, risks, and advantages for every idea.
4. **Domain 3 — Creative Problem Solving (6 pts):** Come up with two *distinct*, practical solutions rather than just copying text from the case.
5. **Domain 4 — Written Communication (6 pts):** Organize your writing cleanly and logically so the reader can follow your thoughts easily.
6. **Domain 5 — Application & Judgment (4 pts):** Defend your recommendation with evidence and explain how your decision impacts key stakeholders (employees, managers, customers, community).