



GMAT Club MBA Application Guide 2015-16

Your go-to guide for MBA
applications this season

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Foreword

First of all, I would like to welcome you to GMAT Club, the largest MBA community of Business School applicants, current business school students, admissions consultants, directors, and alumni. GMAT Club is regularly visited by over 300,000 people each month. We are not an admissions consulting company nor do we provide any admissions related services. However, we do provide support, boost your morale, and are here for you. The value we provide cannot be purchased or found anywhere else:

- GMAT Club is an information resource and whether you are just starting your journey or about to apply, I guarantee that you will find a wealth of information here to help you along in your business school research and application process.
- GMAT Club is a support network that enables you to connect with people who have gone or are currently going through the same process. Applying to MBA programs is a very difficult and stressful process but together we have a greater chance to get the most out of it (and also have a greater chance to remain sane by the end).
- GMAT Club is a community well. You are welcome to draw knowledge from it whenever you need it, but the well stays full through those who contribute back.

Truly Yours,
BB, Founder of GMAT Club



Why MBA?

This fall, every MBA applicant will be answering this question in their mind, at family gatherings, and in their business school applications. Most dread hearing it asked because they never have the perfect answer nor will it be the same every time. At first, the answer usually starts off a bit uncertain, vague, and somewhat insecure, but as time progresses and a few essay drafts are written, the explanation becomes more polished and confident. Throughout my eight years with GMAT Club, I have heard many explanations – anything from a career change to a fresh start after a broken relationship. As you consider your answer, I'd like to share the top 3 reasons most use to pursue a business degree and how you can stand out. Whatever you decide to put in your essays, remember that the key to getting into your first choice school and being happy there, is to be honest, passionate, and committed.

Top 3 Reasons for getting an MBA

- **Career Change**

Changing careers or functions, such as going from IT into consulting or finance into marketing, is probably the most common reason for getting an MBA. Workers switch careers several times during their life time (2-3 times is the latest statistics) and MBA is a good and frequent path. For one, switching a career is not easy – why would anyone take a finance person to do a marketing job? Business school offers a buffer to that (taking marketing classes, getting a marketing internship, and networking with students and alumni in the field). Second, business school often allows one to “sample” careers in the safe environment of a class or a small group. Often thrown into groups with students from all walks of life, one gets the inside perspective on what many industries and jobs are like – consulting, banking, etc. Finally, a career change could also mean starting your own business or vice versa and business school could allow one to gain the missing skills or build key relationships for their future business. Many schools want to attract successful or promising entrepreneurs and sponsor business plan competitions such as the Business Plan Challenge at University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

Recommendation: The keys to cracking this question are:

- to be as specific as possible in your response, such as “I would like to become an IT outsourcing consultant in the United States, working for Accenture”.
- To clearly outline your current role and how MBA will help you bridge into the new one.
- To demonstrate understanding of the role you are planning to pursue.

- **Career Advancement**

Often people get stuck in lower/middle management in large organizations and it may take years for the next promotion. MBA is a good way to break this pattern and signal that you are ready for a stronger position in middle/senior management. For others, a promotion may be there but they are lacking management/business skills to step into it.

This is the best situation to be in and a very common reason to enrol into Executive or Part-Time programs. This is a financially advantageous move if sponsored by the employer – the applicant keeps their income, gets free tuition, and is guaranteed a job after graduation in exchange for longer-term commitment. However, the common opinion is that the non-financial value of part-time programs falls short of a Full Time 2-year MBA program which allows one to focus on their career goals and dedicate themselves to self-improvement without major distractions (no, they never have pool parties in business school). Recommendation: 1) A common path is to paint a strong image of current/past successes, outline that you are at the limit of your career/skill-set, and the next logical step is an MBA that will open a number of doors. 2) Be realistic and avoid coming off naïve about the value of MBA and what it will give you. MBA is not a magical transformation and as the July-August issue of Harvard Business Review suggests – management is not a profession and business education is not one-size-fits-all (See “No, Management is Not a Profession” by Richard Barker, HBR 2010).

Final Recommendation

After you are done answering the “Why MBA” question, the admissions committee should clearly see that you are in a great need of an MBA and by declining you, they will be making a big mistake.

This may sound counter-intuitive but apply to your second choice schools first. Many applicants find that they write much better essays and applications after some practice. Pick your schools carefully – only apply to the schools that you would actually attend. Ask yourself – “If I only get into school X, will I actually attend X?” This will save you time and energy.

Research, Research, Research. You must know everything about your top choice school – it will give you an edge in the entire application package (selecting the right recommender or performing well on the interview) and will show in your essays one way or another and will catch an eye of the admissions committee.

Top 3 Wrong Reasons for getting an MBA:

- Replacement for work experience: Though there are MBA programs that will enroll students straight from college, most emphasize the need for work experience and require applicants to demonstrate a degree of leadership before admission. There is a reason work experience is required – it will help you better apply class knowledge, enable you to contribute to the class more, fit in with other students, and finally get a job after graduation.
- Specific Training – getting an MBA in order to reap financial or marketing training that can be achieved faster and more effectively using other programs.
- Figure out one’s life – yes, MBA is a break for 20 months but it is a terrible reason if all you want to do is figure out your personal life and goals. Everyone will be doing some soul-searching during the program but nobody likes a confused person without goals or purpose.



Why MBA? Why Now?

As you can see, there are two questions here: Why are you pursuing an MBA? And why is now the best time for you to do so? Let's jump right in.

Why MBA?

Another way to phrase this question is: What do you want to do that requires an MBA? After all, isn't your reason for getting an MBA the fact that you want to use your MBA in the future? Therefore, when addressing this question, you must focus on what your career goals are and why you need an MBA to achieve them.

Short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals

Before you draft your goals essay, you need to work out three types of goals: short-term, intermediate, and long-term. Short-term goals are immediately post-MBA until about two years later; intermediate goals are about two to five years post MBA; and long-term goals are those goals from five years in the future onwards. Essays usually ask for short- and long-term goals, but awareness of your intermediate goals will help you bridge the gap between the two.

When describing your goals you'll want to be more specific for your short-term goals since they're the direct link to your MBA program. Define your short-term goal in terms of function and industry. In other words, what do you want to do after your MBA (not study during the program) and in what industry do you see yourself doing it? If geographic location is relevant, include it too.

As you progress to your intermediate and then long-term goals, it's okay to use less detail; nobody knows with certainty where they'll be in 20 years, so it's not expected that you describe the far off future in as much detail as you do the short-term. Also, since no one can predict the future of an industry in flux (like healthcare), be sure that your goals reflect this fluidity.

Answering specific goals questions

Read the question carefully, and emphasize in your writing what the question emphasizes (e.g., does the question ask for a description of short-term and long-term goals specifically, or does it just mention post-MBA goals in a more general manner?). In other words, [let the question guide you](#). Often a question will ask why you want an MBA or why you want to attend a particular program. Link these points directly to your goals – again, your career goal is your reason for attending a specific program and for pursuing an MBA. If a specific program will help you develop the skills you need for a particular goal, then there's your answer for "Why MBA" and for "Why MBA at this particular school."

Creating clear, concise goals

You should create goals that are clear, credible, and convincing. That's Step 1. Some programs, either in essay or interview questions will also want to know how your goals developed. What's motivating you? What makes you tick? An authentic answer that tells your story creates excitement about your dream. You want the adcom to respond to your essay with, "Wow, it would be amazing if she could achieve that!" Think of it like this: You want to turn your reader into your personal cheerleader.

Let's look at a couple of factors that can really engage the reader in the story of your goal.

What is experience? When you describe an experience, you are describing those events

– the when, where, and how – that lead to the development of your goals.

What is motivation? Motivation is that pivotal point when an experience gained traction with you, when you became captivated and engaged in such a way that you were led to pursue a specific path. It can contain emotional, experiential, and analytical elements.

While generally separate entities, these elements can be intertwined in your goals essay. Here is a brief example, slightly modified from a goals essay co-author Cindy Tokumitsu and I wrote for a hypothetical applicant in [The Consultants Guide to MBA Admission](#):

Last year, when I was in Taiwan advising a global financial services company on consolidating its Asia strategy, I found myself thinking what a shame it was that my relationship with the client proved responsive rather than proactive. With my knowledge of the region's changing demographic and logistical realities, I could have recommended strategic opportunities a year ago to prevent the client from getting bogged down in redundant acquisitions and incompatible markets. Following that experience, I envisioned a new consulting paradigm resembling primary care medicine, based on a long-term, prevention focused relationship between the consultant and client.

Describing your experiences and motivation, when asked for them, will transform your goals from static to dynamic. Also, by highlighting your experiences, you'll enhance your credibility and create a story which is more memorable than pure exposition.

Important: Make sure that your goals really require an MBA. Any and all learning is helpful for almost any endeavor, but the adcoms want to see that you really need the resources that an MBA (and specifically an MBA from their program) will offer.

Why Now?

In addition to asking why you need an MBA, many b-school goals essays will also ask you to explain why you are applying now. This question provides yet another way for you to explain that an MBA is right for you.

The "Why now?" question is really a focus and maturity question. You may have rock-solid, detailed career goals and a strong case for how an MBA will help you achieve them, but if you can't explain why you need to pursue your MBA now – now and not a year from now – then the adcoms may conclude that you're applying now for the wrong reasons.

A sense of urgency or momentum will convince the adcom that your seat in the next MBA class is a necessity.

The implicit "I need it now" mentality should infuse your essay. The fact that all of your

experiences and motivations have led you to this point and that the lack of an MBA will keep you from following that trajectory of your leadership roles, skills, and functional breadth should underlie the description of your goals. There should be no [“Why MBA?”](#) answer without a “Why now?” answer alongside it or implicit within

You decided to get an MBA. Great! But from where? There's a lot of amazing business schools out there. How do you know which one is a good fit for you? Besides the well-recognized names, which ones should you apply to? Where do you start your search? [EssaySnark](#) is here with some advice to get you started.

Obviously you found **GMAT Club** and so half your battle is done! There are some remarkable resources here that will help you learn about these schools. The school-specific forums are incredibly helpful for discussions about a particular program.

A note of caution when reading things on the Internet: **Much of the admissions process is incredibly subjective.** One person may dislike a school for the same reasons that you would find it appealing, and misinformation and strong opinions abound. Keep an open mind, and do a lot of follow-up on anything you hear. You must rely on your own instincts – trust but verify.

How many schools should you be targeting?

[EssaySnark](#) recommends applying to six or so MBA programs throughout the entirety of the admissions season. If you do a good job on that many, you're going to end up with a couple offers to choose from. If you're starting early enough to get some Round 1 apps in, then three or four applications per round is ideal. If Round 2 will be your first submissions, then you need to apply to more schools. Be reasonable though. If you try to do more than four or five schools at once, you'll get totally burned out. The quality will suffer and your chances of admission go down drastically.

However, at this early stage, **don't limit yourself.** Your job right now is to explore all your options and identify the best schools for you. Your list can be fairly long here at the beginning. Keep adding to it as you hear about schools that you like. Stay open-minded. The schools that end up on your short list may be ones you hadn't even heard of at the beginning!

In addition, you shouldn't be afraid to cross schools off your list, for any reason. Over time you should be whittling the list of targets down. **Aim to identify eight to ten MBA programs that you're interested in over the next few weeks.**

[The EssaySnark blog has a resources page for researching schools.](#) In addition, we're offering these tips to get you started.

Here's how to start your school research project

Figure out why you want an MBA.

This may sound a little silly, but a lot of people don't put enough thought into the whole reason behind their interest in the MBA. A useful tool to begin with is [this GMAT Club article from Accepted.com: Where should you apply? \(with case studies\)](#). Answering some of those questions for yourself and knowing why you want an MBA can take you far in understanding which schools are good targets for you. Do some preliminary work to identify your interests and goals at the outset and you'll be in a stronger position for all the important decisions to come in the application process.

Tap your network.

Do you know anyone with an MBA? If people at work already know that you're interested in bschool, then ask around at the office (obviously you won't want to do so if it will put your job in jeopardy). If you work at a big company, you could even look on the corporate website to see which executives have MBAs, and set up informational interviews with them. Or if you need to be more lowkey about the MBA at work, then leverage your social circle. Maybe a friend of a friend went to a school that you're interested in, or your college roommate was just accepted. Look on LinkedIn. Find people to talk to. Break out of your shell, make some phone calls, send a few emails.

TIP: Here's a great article on [How to Make Phone Calls in Business](#) from Mark Suster, a well-respected VC in California.

Study the schools' websites.

You may feel that a lot of the schools' websites sound the same. They are all trying to market to you using similar language, and sometimes it gets overwhelming. At this stage of your research, pay more attention to the parts of the site focused on students. Don't worry about the application instructions just yet. Look at the class profile, and see if they have biographies of current students and recent alum. Check out their academic offerings and student clubs. There's a core set of common features that all schools share – all of them have a Corporate Finance class and a Consulting Club – but there's also a lot of differences. You'll start to understand what each school is about as you have more and more interactions with them.

TIP: [Get any school guides available for the programs you're interested in](#), and see what different advice and insights others have to offer.

Sign up for all the schools' emails.

Most schools let you register your interest with them before you even start an application. While you're on their website, one of the first things you should do is to sign up for their email announcements. Many schools track candidates by geography and you'll get advance news about information sessions in your area.

Take notes!

At this stage you're a sponge, absorbing information – but it can be overwhelming. Keep tabs on the insights you learn. When you add a school to your list, make notes on WHY you're interested in them. You need to have reasons for choosing a school (not just the

fact that they're highly ranked). You might also want to note the reason for eliminating a school for consideration, so you can remember your thought process later on. Also, keep track of who you've spoken to and what you talked about. These notes can not only help you organize all this information you're collecting, they'll also be a huge asset to you later on, when you're writing essays and you're telling the adcom why you are interested in their program.

TIP: You might want to create a spreadsheet to record the important attributes that you care about and which schools offer them.

Finally: Timebox the process.

While the research phase never really ends – you'll still be discovering new things about your programs of interest all the way through, including the interview experience and Admit Weekend – it's also a phase that can get away from you if you let it. It's important to set an initial strategy and move on within a reasonable amount of time. Give yourself a few weeks – or a month – but set yourself a deadline by which you'll at least have a shortlist of eight-ish schools identified.

Talking to people about their experiences in business school is invaluable in helping you learn about schools and discovering what to focus on in your selection process. The best people to speak with are current students and recent graduates. Not only can they share their experiences with you, they can often give you input about the other schools they considered when they were applying. Just keep in mind that schools change; the policies and programs that may have been in effect when someone else went through the admissions process a year or two ago may not apply any longer. Take in all the information you can and be sure to verify it before proceeding.

Remember too that interacting with the school itself is the best way to get reliable information and insights about their program. You really can only figure out if a school is right for you by interacting with the school community directly. This means, if possible, taking a trip to visit. Or, attend a local info session. That “talk to people” step is critically important. Bschoo is a tremendous investment of time, energy, and money. You want to be an informed consumer when you choose which schools to apply to.

To wrap things up, we have to mention the obvious: We didn't mention anything about your profile and choosing schools. Yes, GPA and GMAT scores matter – but you shouldn't be deciding which schools to apply to based solely on those statistics. If your GMAT score is very low, then it may limit your options, and of course you need to be realistic, based on what you'll be presenting to the adcom. To be more confident of your chances, you'll want to find schools whose accepted students' GMAT scores are in line with yours. If you fall outside the 80% range (usually published on the schools' websites) then you're going to have a tougher time getting in. Not impossible, but definitely not the easy route.

At this early stage, you're deciding which schools are interesting to you. It's kind of like going on an online dating site and looking at profiles of people who are available. Any of them might be The One... but who knows which it will be? Lots of them seem very attractive. **You need to get to know them a little bit more before you will be able to decide.**

Now that you've narrowed down the full universe of business schools to a more manageable list of ten or so MBA programs, [EssaySnark](#) has a few more tips for taking your research to the next level.

Follow your schools on Twitter and [Facebook](#)

Many schools have multiple Twitter accounts – not just the admissions team, but often other accounts that broadcast school news, and for career services, and often different research departments and rockstar professors too.

TIP: *Consider creating a new Twitter account for yourself just for your bschool admissions project. You don't have to do that but it would allow you to have a more focused experience, and sometimes the schools follow back – if you're using a bschool-only account for yourself, then there's no risk that they'll see your tweets to your friends.*

Attend any and all school webinars, Twitter chats, and especially any in-person events that you can.

Most schools send admissions staff around the world in the summertime so it's very likely that there will be information sessions happening somewhere near you. Other schools have virtual events and discussions. Look for online MBA fairs and other opportunities to interact with the schools. Webinars with admissions consultants are certainly also helpful (you can learn about those here on GMAT Club) but your priority needs to be the schools themselves.

Talk to current students.

Many schools have a way to contact students with questions. Look on their websites for email addresses and contact forms. Wharton, for example, has the [S2S Discussion Forum](#) where you can post a question for current students and alumni to answer. There's

only a few Wharton alumni who are active on that forum and keep in mind that they are not admissions representatives, so sometimes the answers given seem a little off (that's just [EssaySnark](#)'s opinion). However, those forums and direct contact with students are a great way to get valuable information from the school community.

Reach out to admissions.

A few schools will let you do a pre-application consult with their admissions teams, to talk about your goals and whether their program is a good fit. The Duke Cross-Continent MBA is one such program that has this. Definitely take advantage of this if it's available (just to be clear though, this is not something that most top full-time programs do; it's the less-common programs and schools that tend to offer it). However, unless you have a really good reason, [EssaySnark](#) feels that it's best to avoid contacting the admissions people outside of their regular outreach channels like info sessions and chats. Most people's application questions can be answered through a search through the school's

website. If you have an unusual situation that you need guidance on, then sure, you can ask admissions what to do. Often though, people contact admissions when they don't need to, and sometimes that can backfire.

The best way to learn about a school is to visit.

Obviously this is time- and resource-intensive so you wouldn't do it for just any school. However, once you start to narrow your list, there's nothing more valuable than visiting the campus in terms of the ROI it offers on knowing whether it's a good fit for you.

A quick warning about the advice above regarding outreach to schools and students: Make sure that your communication has a purpose! If sending an email to a student, you need to pose a question for them – and be sure it's a good one! Don't contact people just for the sake of contacting them, and definitely don't waste people's time by asking something that could easily be answered from the website. Many school websites are a little lacking, so it may require some digging on your part, but be sure to make that effort before you ask a question of anyone at the school (either a student or the admissions team).

The process of selecting schools can be a little daunting. Take your time with it, and be as thorough as you can. Just like with dating, it's the kind of effort you need to put in for yourself – nobody else can tell you what the right school for you is. You need to have some quality time with the school before you can decide if they might be The One.

[EssaySnark](#) invites you to read some of the applicant Success Stories on our blog – almost all of them talk about how they found the school they applied to and the process (it's a little like falling in love – lots of fun but often some heartache!). Here's a great one to begin with: “[How I discovered the IESE was the school for me.](#)”

We hope that you'll have an equally exciting Success Story to share with us soon!



Which Schools to Apply to?

You've decided that you are going to apply to b-school. Now you need to ask yourself the next critical question: WHERE? Where should you spend your next few years? Which city? Which country? And last but not least, WHICH PROGRAM?

[Accepted.com](https://www.accepted.com) has designed a handy infographic, the [Accepted Positioning System](https://www.accepted.com/positioning-system), that will help you answer the important questions in a way that will lead you to your ideal MBA program. Here I'll highlight some of the questions that you'll encounter during your journey. The answers you provide will guide you on the most effective route to your goal:

1. What is your post-MBA goal?

- a. What job function do you see yourself doing?
- b. Which industry do you want to work in?
- c. Where (which country/city/environment) do you want to live?

2. Which schools support your goals?

- a. Are the companies you would like to work for recruiting for the functions/industries you would like to pursue at your target school?
- b. Do your target schools offer clubs and extra-curricular activities in your desired field (and if not, is it possible for you to start your own club)?
- c. Does the school's curriculum offer a major, concentration, or adequate coverage for your particular interests and goals?
- d. Are there professors who have done or are currently doing research in your area of interest or in a field where you want to acquire expertise?

3. What are your qualifications?

- a. Are you academically competitive? (Take a look at your GMAT/GRE score, transcript, additional courses, etc.)
- b. Do you have impressive work experience, qualitatively and quantitatively?
- c. Do your community service activities show additional skills and character traits (like initiative, leadership, responsibility, and teamwork)?

4. Choose your 4-8 schools to apply to

The schools that support your goals and at which you are competitive are the ones you should apply to. If there are lots of schools in that category, you're in luck! Apply to the ones that simply appeal to you most for whatever reasons. If no school meets those two criteria, then you either need to improve your qualifications or adjust your goal.

These questions are clear, but how do the answers guide you? Here are a few prototypical applicants so you can see at least on a superficial level how I would use this information.

Joe

- 1) Wants to go into Management Consulting at elite strat consulting firm
- 2) Schools to consider: HBS, Stanford, Kellogg, Tuck, Darden, Chicago, Wharton, MIT, Columbia, Haas, NYU Stern, Ross
- 3) Qualifications
 - a. 740 GMAT
 - b. 3.7 GPA from Princeton. Majored in econ and graduated in 2009.
 - c. Interned for boutique consulting firm in college.
 - d. Captain of tennis team at Princeton.
 - e. President of fraternity.
 - f. Joined army and served as an officer in combat. Should be discharged this June.
- 4) Where should he apply? HBS, Stanford, Wharton, Kellogg, and Tuck. Will apply to Darden, Haas, and Ross R2 if not accepted anywhere R1.

Jane

1. Wants to go into marketing with focus on digital marketing and then maybe start her own company. Prefers to live in South Eastern US.
2. Schools to consider: Kellogg, Cornell, Haas, Duke, UNC, Ross, UCLA, Emory, UT, MIT, CMU Tepper
3. Qualifications
 - a. 680 GMAT with 65% on Quant. Highest score after 3 attempts. Taking MBAMath and several quant classes at local college to boost math skills, counteract low quant score, and prepare for quant demands of b-school.
 - b. 3.4 GPA from public ivy. Majored in econ and history. Graduated in 2007
 - c. Works as law firm manager in 20-lawyer office. Has been in charge of publicity and social media for firm which has seen tremendous growth from that channel. Started as a clerk after college and worked her way up.
 - d. Married has one child. Husband can work from anywhere.
 - e. Active in church and alumni association. Runs 5 and 10K races. In college was officer in sorority.
 - f. Wants to apply R1 for 2014.
4. Where should she apply? Duke, UNC, Darden and Kellogg for R1. Kellogg is a stretch, but she really likes its strength in marketing and collegial culture. Will include as a stretch. Will apply to UT and Emory round 2 if not accepted anywhere R1.

Ajay

1. Has high tech product ideas and wants to start own business, if not immediately after MBA, then within five years after MBA. Attracted to design thinking.
2. Schools to consider: MIT, Haas, Stanford, CMU Tepper, UT Austin, UCLA, USC Marshall, Duke, Ross, Cornell Johnson, UNC, Babson, Rotman
3. Qualifications
 - a. 700 GMAT (51 quant; struggles with verbal). Took previously and had 660 and 680. Doesn't want to retake again.
 - b. Has 7.2/10 CGPA from IIT Madras. B. Tech. Graduated in 2008
 - c. Has been working for Tata Consulting on software consulting projects for last 3 years in the UK and Europe. Previously worked for Infosys as a programmer for two years in India. Can show increasing responsibility at work.
 - d. Was active in college, but hasn't done much since outside of work. Likes to play guitar and cricket.
 - e. Wants to apply in 2013-14
4. Where should he apply? Will apply to Darden, UCLA, UT Austin, and Duke R1. Will apply to UNC, USC Marshall, Babson, and Rotman if not accepted R1. Also considering Ross' MS in Entrepreneurship.

Jack

1. Wants to go into R/E development/ finance and grow family business. Really prefers East Coast.
2. Schools to consider Harvard, Stanford, Wharton, Chicago, Columbia, NYU, Haas, Kellogg, Duke, Cornell, Rochester, Georgetown, UNC, UCLA, USC, LBS
3. Qualifications
 - a. 730 GMAT, balanced.
 - b. 2.9 from Georgetown. Class of '09 (Immature freshman year; illness sophomore year; upward trend in last two years; dean's list as a senior) Majored in math; minored in Asian history. Has passed all 3 levels of CFA. Took a few business classes (accounting, stats for business, finance) online and got straight A's
 - c. Financial analyst program for 2 years. Then joined family property management business (outside NYC) for two years. Handled 2 8-figure property acquisitions.
 - d. Had been active in Romney campaign and in local Republican politics.
 - e. Wants to apply in 2013-14
4. Where should he apply? Will apply to Columbia, NYU Stern, Wharton, and Duke R1. If not accepted, will try for Chicago, UNC, UCLA, and Georgetown round 2. May substitute LBS for one of the last four.

Follow these steps to map out the route to the best MBA program for you. For more details, grab your copy of [Best MBA Programs: A Guide to Selecting the Right One.](#)

GMAT vs. GRE

With nearly all business schools now accepting both the GMAT and the GRE, pre-MBAs find themselves considering which test to take. The million-dollar question, of course, is “which test do admissions officers prefer?” but the answer to that question is “it’s complicated.” Each school has its own method for vetting candidates, so there is no one answer to what “admissions officers” in general prefer. A good rule of thumb is that, since the MBA rankings services report (and often rank based upon) GMAT scores, if you can boast a GMAT score above your school’s target average, you’re helping that school in the rankings and therefore should take/report the GMAT. But if it’s that easy for you to assume a 700+ score, you’re likely not reading this post!

If you’re like the rest of us mere mortals and you’re considering which test to take, you’ve probably already heard lots of the “conventional wisdom” out there. With that in mind, let’s dive a little deeper on what that conventional wisdom means for you:

1) GRE Quant is Easier

GRE quant is easier really on two different dimensions. For one, it’s more straightforward, with markedly fewer of the really-clever types of GMAT problems and with no Data Sufficiency (“Quantitative Comparison,” the GRE counterpart to Data Sufficiency, is – true to form – more straightforward). And secondly, you’re not competing with the insane GMAT quant percentile system, which is getting more and more competitive all the time.

But keep that idea of percentiles in mind! The GMAT is freakishly competitive at the upper end, around the 80th percentile and above. But again if you’re planning on being in that range, you’re probably not reading this post. If your quant skills are in the neighborhood where you’re hoping for a few breaks on test day to “be competitive” at your target schools (and not where you’re looking to stand out with a truly elite score), the GMAT strikes back a bit with this caveat: because the GRE is easier, it provides much less room for error. When you’re facing ~15 (out of 20) straightforward questions per quant section, so is everyone else, so you have to get most of those right to stay competitive. The GMAT, although harder, is more lenient toward the middle of the curve because in that section everyone is missing a fair number of those harder problems. So the GRE quant will absolutely feel easier, but the net impact on your score relative to others might not reflect that. And since taking either test isn’t something you’d really qualify as “fun” you know you’re going to suffer for ~4 hours either time. So don’t let “it feels easier” be the primary driver of which test you take; take an official practice test of each type and get a feel for your scores and percentiles on each one. Some people will perform better on the easier-but-less-lenient GRE and others will see better relative scores on the harder-but-more-lenient GMAT.

2) The GRE is about memorizing vocabulary

Both the GMAT verbal and GRE verbal feature Reading Comprehension and elements of Critical Reasoning (the GMAT addresses this category – similar to LSAT Logical Reasoning – as its own question type; the GRE tests these questions but under the umbrella of “Reading Comprehension”). The different question types are that the GMAT has Sentence Correction while the GRE has Text Completion & Sentence Equivalence. Largely because GMAT Sentence Correction has evolved into a quite-challenging logic-and-meaning task, many pre-MBAs considering GMAT vs. GRE have longingly identified the GRE verbal as a much more straightforward memorization/flashcards exercise – memorize these few hundred vocab words for the GRE and you won’t have to deal with tricky Sentence Correction. But in reality, GRE verbal is less about “vocab” and more

about logic than that conventional wisdom suggests. Up until 2011, the GRE much more directly tested vocabulary, and so many of the third-party study resources on the market have continued to feature the same flashcards and vocab drills. But the “revised general test” GRE has a different flavor: a smaller percentage of problems require the use of obscure vocabulary, while a much larger percentage feature words that you know but difficult prompts that force you to really think to choose the right word. (And one of our favorite themes on the GRE: the primary definition of the right answer doesn’t seem to fit, but the second or third definition of that word does.)

Vocabulary to the GRE is what idioms are to the GMAT: 10+ years ago they used to be central themes, and plenty of study resources still exist for them, but now they “appear” on the test but not as the main items being tested. So before you dust off your SAT vocabulary flashcards and commit yourself to the GRE, take an official practice test from each exam and see how you feel with the different question types and strategies.

3) The GRE is more user-friendly.

Similar to the quantitative section difference, the entire GRE is likely to feel more comfortable and user-friendly than the GMAT. Almost entirely, this is because the GMAT is question-by-question adaptive (so it simply cannot allow you to skip questions or return to them later) whereas the GRE is section-level adaptive (so you can go back to questions, skip the hard ones to save them for later, etc.). And the GRE has implemented features that go along with this, including a flagging tool that helps you remember which questions you want to return to later. So the GRE will feel more comfortable for almost everyone.

What does this mean for you? Ultimately the answer lies in how it affects your performance competitive with others. For many, the finality of each answer on the GMAT – you answer and that’s it – creates so much stress that they know they can’t perform to their potential. If you’re in that camp, the GRE is probably a better choice, as it provides you with more flexibility and that corresponding peace of mind to relax and let your skills shine. But remember that everyone has those same features, so if you consider yourself someone who performs well under pressure, the added pressure of the GMAT might just be your competitive advantage.

4) Practice Makes Perfect

To this point, you should recognize that the GRE is likely going to feel substantially easier and more comfortable – the math is easier, the test format allows for more comfort, and we haven’t even mentioned that the GRE features an extra essay instead of the hectic GMAT Integrated Reasoning section. Whether that comfort translates to a more competitive score is something you’ll need to investigate with practice tests, but for most test-takers the GRE test-day experience is the more user-friendly of the two test experiences.

But then consider your ability to practice. In large part because it’s been around longer, the current GMAT provides more official study tools than the official GRE. The official GMAT offers the two sets of two GMAT Prep practice tests, the entire Official Guide for GMAT Review series, the GMAT Focus quant software, and previous installments of Official Guides and (paper-based) practice tests, allowing for markedly more official practice than the Official GRE. And then consider the third-party resources available for the GMAT, including this exact GMATClub website. We at Veritas Prep have been locked in a decade-long GMAT arms race with top competitors to develop more and better resources for students – many of which are free simply for branding purposes.

On the flip side, because the GRE is newer – both in general since the 2011 revision and to the business school audience, which has driven all of the GMAT test prep innovations – the top competitors haven’t developed the same levels of resources (Veritas Prep, for example, is new to the GRE space within the last year) and much of the verbal prep

material in the marketplace still teaches heavily to the pre-2011 test (please be careful with this!).

So the “harder” GMAT has more potential to be made easier simply given the preponderance of practice material, while the “easier” GRE hasn’t quite hit that level yet. (Although a nod to the folks at ETS, the makers of the GRE: the official materials do a fantastic job of teaching strategy in addition to just showcasing what questions look like) What does that mean for you? The good news is that the tests are similar enough in content that studying for one will invariably help you on the other. So if you end up taking the GRE and need additional math practice, GMAT resources will absolutely help you. But also consider how far you are away from being competitive; the more practice tests and overall study assistance you need, the better the GMAT starts to look simply because there’s a nearly inexhaustible set of resources should you need to study for several months or even up to a year.

In summary, there is plenty of conventional wisdom out there comparing the GMAT and GRE, but in the end the choice of which test to take is personal: on which test are you more likely to post the most competitive score? The best way to answer that questions is to take official practice tests (GRE: PowerPrep, available from the ETS website; GMAT: GMATPrep, available from the mba.com website) and then determine where your scores seem closest to your goals. Remember that your ultimate goal isn’t about GMAT vs. GRE but instead about Kellogg vs. Booth or part-time vs. full-time, so find the path that works best for you to get that competitive score so that the next set of decisions you get to make is all the more worthwhile.

Are My IR and AWA Scores Important?

In recent years, the average GMAT scores for matriculating students to top MBA programs have increased – some schools have experienced an increase of over 10 points. Add to this the fact that many top MBA programs have restricted the required resume length to one page (two pages was once the norm) and have also reduced the number of admissions essays from five to one or two, and you will note that these trends mean that candidates have less application space to “make their case” for admission. This may also mean that GPAs and GMAT scores will play a more pronounced role in MBA admissions outcomes. It is worthwhile to note that in a 2014 Kaplan survey of over 200 business school admissions officers, 50% of respondents indicated that a low GMAT score was “the biggest application killer”. By this, they were referring to the overall GMAT score (verbal and quant portions). The Integrated Reasoning (IR) and Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) scores are new in the GMAT test and receive separate scores from the overall GMAT score, which reflects the traditional verbal and quant sections. In light of the GMAT score’s importance, many candidates are concerned about how their separate IR and AWA scores will affect their odds of admissions success.

In 2012, the GMAT saw one of its most intensive revisions in its history – it cut down the AWA from two essays to one in order to make room for the new IR section. The AWA and IR each comprise 30 minutes of the overall GMAT testing time of 3.5 hours. The new 30-minute IR section, which is scored on a scale from 1 to 8, utilizes a new design to measure test-takers’ ability to analyze information presented in multiple formats from multiple sources. In today’s technological, data heavy business world, testing a candidate’s ability to handle a small compilation of data through syntax, charts, tables and wording can help business schools judge candidates on the skills that will actually matter in their field.

The one AWA essay is now based on the Analysis of an Argument. In this writing assignment, test-takers are given an issue that could be fought from either side and, without rehearsal, must write a sound argument to reason and identify flawed logic within a 30-minute time crunch. This section is arguably useful to admissions committees and prospective employers because a candidate’s ability to reason and break down an argument will affect them at some point during their career. If not today, then five or ten years from now your ability to make a strong argument may determine whether you get a new deal signed, make a sale, or get a contract renewed. The AWA is intended to reflect an applicant’s skill in this area. The essays are scored twice, independently, on a scale of 1 to 6 and then the scores are averaged. The Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC), which designs the GMAT exam, notes that one of those two scores may be generated by an “essay-scoring engine”. A third evaluation of the essay will occur if the two scores generated vary by more than one point. In scoring the AWA essay, the quality of ideas, organization, idea expression, idea development, stated reasoning, examples and quality of written English are all factors considered.

Do the IR and AWA Scores Matter? What Ad Com Members Say...

So, do the IR and AWA scores matter? In October 2014, Kaplan released the results of its survey of admissions officers at over 200 U.S. business schools. Sixty percent of those surveyed indicated that an applicant’s IR score is not a significant part of their MBA admissions evaluation process at the current time. The likely reason is simply because both the AWA and IR are so new. MBA admissions committees do not have data

stretching back enough years to know with certainty how these two scores correlate with student performance in the MBA program or after. So, they have insufficient reason to use those scores as major components in determining admissions outcomes. Also, because GMAT scores remain valid for five years, the business schools are still receiving applications in which applicants have GMAT scores but no IR score. They therefore cannot compare all candidates uniformly on that basis, which provides a disincentive for using the IR score more heavily in the evaluation process.

What Sorts of Candidates Might be Affected Nonetheless

So even though many ad coms don't weigh the AWA and IR scores heavily across the board, are there some candidates for whom a low AWA or IR score might hurt their chances of admission?

Yes. Given that a very low IR or AWA score might raise flags of concern for the ad com, a candidate with a severely low IR score (say, between 1-4) or a low AWA score (say, between 1-3) may find themselves facing more scrutiny and therefore facing harder odds of admission. Who is particularly at risk? Two types of candidates in particular can be affected more than others right now:

- Candidates who are "right on the edge" – meaning, if you had a number of weaknesses in your profile, adding another weakness with an extremely low IR or AWA score won't help and may be yet another factor tilting your application toward a rejection.
- Candidates from profiles or demographics with high numbers of applicants might also find themselves more affected than the typical applicant. So, for the East Asian foreign national male techie, the Indian foreign national male engineer, or the small shop private equity professional, moving forward with an extremely low IR or AWA score means you have a soft spot in your profile. For such "overrepresented" candidates, though, if you score well in all categories of the GMAT, including in the IR section (score of 7 or 8), you can be a standout applicant.

How Much Concern to Have if Your IR Score is Really, *Really* Low

Here's a way to think about whether your admission could ever be at risk if you have a weak IR score... Worry less when most other metrics and factors point overwhelmingly to your strong analytical and quantitative skills. Is the quant side of your GMAT score high? Did you have a quant-heavy undergraduate major in which you excelled? Does your job require that you handle a lot of data effectively? If the answers to these questions are yes, the ad com will likely be less concerned with a low IR score.

Worry more when many other metrics and factors point to a deficit in analytical reasoning skills. Was your GMAT quant score low? Do you have a series of low grades in quant-heavy courses in your academic record? These factors reinforce the theme that a low IR score raises – that you might have difficulty with analytical work in business school or that you might not be capable of analytical excellence. You should consider taking steps to alleviate this concern by either securing a higher IR score or taking some other step, such as enrolling in an online course that can help you improve the analytical and quant skills you will need in business school and beyond.

How Much Concern to Have if Your AWA Score is Really, *Really* Low

Here's a way to think about whether your admission could ever be at risk if you have a weak AWA score... Worry less when most other metrics and factors point overwhelmingly to your strengths in communication, both oral and written. Is the verbal side of your GMAT score high? If you were required to take the TOEFL, is your score high? Did you have a college major that required extensive writing and in which you excelled? Does your job require that you communicate effectively, either orally or in writing? If the answers to these questions are yes, the ad com will likely be less concerned with a low AWA score.

Worry more when many other metrics and factors point to a deficit in your ability to communicate ideas clearly or a deficit in your ability to speak effectively in English. Was the verbal side of your GMAT score low? If you were required to take the TOEFL, is your score low? Do you have a series of low grades in courses that might appear to have relied heavily on writing skills? Do your recommendation writers note that communication, written or oral, is an area where you struggle? Did you struggle with communication in your MBA admissions interview? These factors reinforce the theme that a low AWA score raises – that you might have difficulty expressing yourself in class during discussions or you might not have the skills to construct and convey compelling arguments in projects. More generally, the admissions committee may be concerned about your ability to excel in their program if it is taught primarily in English. You should consider taking steps to alleviate this concern by either securing a higher AWA score or taking some other step such as enrolling in an English or writing course that can help you improve your writing and communication skills.

Can the IR Score Affect Your Short-Term Post-MBA Goal?

Remember also that while ad coms are still referring to the AWA and IR scores but not necessarily weighing them heavily, some potential employers may be paying closer attention. A low IR score in particular can affect your ability to land a post-MBA job that is highly analytical or quant-heavy. Some observers argue that consulting companies like McKinsey, for instance, are more reluctant to bring someone with a weak IR into a post-MBA consulting position. Similarly, if you indicate in your MBA application that you expect to land a job with a company like McKinsey when you have an IR score of 2, the ad com may become concerned you won't be able to secure your post-MBA goal, which gives them little incentive to admit you since they won't want a placement problem on their hands. If you have a weak IR score, be careful how you phrase your short-term goal.

Will the IR and AWA Matter More in the Future?

Because the IR and AWA have been in the applicant pool for a few years, admissions committees are developing practices for how the GMAT's IR section is used in admissions decisions. Now that business schools have received two years of applicants who have the IR and AWA scores on their record, they have data for how the AWA and IR scores correlate with performance among their matriculating students. They are studying to what degree the AWA and IR are reasonable predictors of success in the MBA program and in post-MBA careers. With more and more of this information in hand over the next few years, if indeed a correlation is seen, the IR and/or the AWA will likely take on much more importance in admissions for most candidates.

How to Strengthen Your IR or AWA Score

If you have reason to believe that, given the particulars of your case, you are best off with a higher IR or AWA score, there are ways you can begin to prepare to try to secure a

higher score. You can secure an Enhanced Score Report from GMAT, which breaks down your performance more specifically. There, you can view the percentage of correctly answered IR questions and other key information. You can also secure tools and software programs that can help you practice responses to integrated reasoning questions. There are also software tools and programs to help you assess strengths and pitfalls of arguments, articulate alternative views and strengthen other skills need to perform better on the AWA section.

Remember also that the newly revised testing provisions may make your choice to re-test more attractive. Effective as of late July 2015, you can cancel your GMAT score after you take it if you don't like it and the cancelled score won't show up on your official report. Although you are still limited to sitting for a GMAT exam only five times in a 12-month period, you can also now re-test only 16 days after your last GMAT attempt (in the past, you had to wait 31 days).

You know which question, hands down, we get the most? “Is my GMAT good enough?” Oh, you know the tune? We thought you might. While this is a very common question, answering it is as difficult as it is nuanced. The reason? The essence of this question hinges on the answers to a few others. Well, maybe you want to know how important the GMAT is? Surprise! The answer to that depends on several other factors as well. So, without further adieu, let’s dig deeper into these questions to figure out what your options are!

First and foremost, you should step back and consider, “what is the GMAT intended to do?” Of course, we all know that the GMAT is incredibly important for rankings – the almighty rankings! Rankings play a big part in the quality of applicants, professors, and recruiters that are attracted to a program and the GMAT is a critical component in the methodology of many popular ranking publications. Additionally the GMAT is an academic proxy and the most recent demonstration of your problem solving, critical thinking, and analytical skills. The AdComs see your performance on this exam as a strong predictor of not only your academic performance at their respective institutions, and beyond that in your professional careers. In fact, many top banking and consulting firms request your score as well with many having informal or formal cut offs. To drill home the importance of this test even further, the GMAT is the only true “apples to apples” comparison that AdComs have when evaluating their applicant pool. When we say, “no two applicants are alike”...we mean it! The combination of all of your qualifications and experiences are indeed unique, so the standardized nature of the GMAT is an appealing data point for schools to use when comparing applicants.

The GMAT is becoming an increasingly valuable component of your application, especially when it comes to the M7 schools. Pretty big bill for one standardized test, don’t you think?

But when does the GMAT carry “more weight”? If the rest of your profile doesn’t provide a lot of information on your analytical abilities, the quant section of the GMAT becomes a powerful data point for AdComs. MBA programs like Columbia, MIT, Wharton, and Booth which have a rigorous curriculum that strongly emphasizes quantitative ability will look at this data point to make sure that admitted students can handle the coursework.

Also, if you’re an older candidate, perhaps 6-10 years removed from your academic years, the test becomes more valuable to assess your abilities now. However, if you come from a rigorous, top-5 engineering school and graduated with honors, for example, that may be seen as a more consistent representation of your analytical abilities than the GMAT. Or let’s say you didn’t perform as well as you would’ve liked in undergrad – then the GMAT (along with your alternative transcript) becomes an opportunity for you to build a case that these recent events portray a more accurate example of your analytical and critical thinking skills. Another factor in determining how the GMAT plays a role in your application is actually to look at who you are and where you come from. By now, you probably know that business schools segment their applicants into different pools. One aspect of this segmentation is your ethnicity. For example, an Asian or Indian male is considered to be an overrepresented demographic profile whereas a female from Costa Rica is likely to be considered a less represented demographic profile. Accepted applicants from overrepresented demographics tend to have higher GMAT averages versus less represented demographics. It’s simple supply and demand!

With this information in the back of your mind, we can now begin to answer the question you asked in the first place. Look at your specific situation. Do you have a low GMAT score? If your score is in the bottom 10th percentile, (below the low end of the middle 80%) this is a big red flag. It's pretty telling, right? Less than 10% of last year's class had a GMAT lower than yours. In smaller programs where there are only around 300 students per class that means about 30 students in a pool of thousands that applied. If you're in this boat, you'll need a rather impressive showing with the rest of your application. There should be something else within your profile that is just so unique and compelling that the AdCom just has to interview you. We are talking about serious world changing experiences here that maybe 1% of applicants have. If this isn't the case (and most of the time it isn't – you're not as special as you think you are), you should give the test another shot.

The next question is what if you're close to the median score of your target school? Great! The median is a useful directional guidepost on where you stand. If you find yourself within 10-20 points of the median, you're likely in the running (and by that we mean, your GMAT score probably won't be the reason you could get dinged). Remember, the applicant pool you're coming from (ethnicity, profession, etc.) affects how you evaluate your position on the scale. If you are in an overrepresented group, you should add at least 10-20 points to the median before you evaluate your score. Even if you have a score that slightly above 700 that doesn't mean you are a lock to get into the program. There are stories every year of applicants with 780+ GMAT scores that get dinged. It simply means that you made the first cut and the floor is yours to make an impression on the admissions committee.

How about the rest of your application? Are there aspects of your past experiences, either professionally or from your involvement, that give you an "x-factor"? Or are you pretty much par for the course when it comes to the traditional MBA applicant? If you're unique and have that coveted "x-factor" that AdComs are looking for, you may have some more leeway with the GMAT. However, if you're a traditional candidate with impressive credentials but nothing that necessarily stands out, you'll want to strive to beat the median by 10-20 points.

We get it, the GMAT isn't the most exciting thing in the world. But don't let your aversion to the test affect your decision on whether you retake it. If you're in a position to spend the time and resources to prepare and get your test scores to the level you want, by all means take it again! If your first run at the exam didn't meet your expectations, you should probably take another crack at it. However, if you've taken the GMAT more than 3 times, with a good deal of preparation each time, then maybe not. Or, if you've taken the test 2 or 3 times, your practice tests aren't improving dramatically, and your best score is at the median or above for a school that you're happy attending (not a stretch school), then you should call it day and reset your expectations. If you're down to the wire with application deadlines looming, remember that studying and retaking the test will carry significant opportunity cost!

And keep in mind – GMAC (the folks who create the test) has recently changed their policy. You can take the test within 16 days of your last attempt and, if you cancel, no one will ever know you even showed up. Use that to your advantage!

A parting thought – something we hear a lot of is "I know my GMAT is low but..." A lot of folks, when faced with a bad score, want to justify or assume that they're unique enough to pull off an acceptance anyway. 9 times out of 10, that isn't the case. The numbers don't lie. The GMAT is one of the columns that support your application. A little structural damage can be compensated for by the other columns but severe damage will cause everything to fall down. Don't fall into the "but..." trap!

We hope this information was helpful and we wish you the best of luck!

- The team @ Critical Square

Fit vs Ranking

Everyone wants to go to Harvard or Stanford or Wharton, and you probably do, too. They are top-ranked business schools. It will be an easy decision if you are admitted to one of these schools.

What about other schools? Obviously it's very difficult to get into one of these three top programs. It would be foolish for most people to apply only to these three and that's it. Other schools are good too – but there's a lot of them. [Wikipedia lists around 300 business schools in the U.S. alone](#). Which ones should you pick?

Rankings are useful as a starting point for your school research. Rankings show how different schools can compare against each other. They use data about a school and rate the respective criteria on an apples-to-apples basis – things like:

- **GMAT or GRE score and GPA:** How high is the bar? A school with higher average scores is going to be more appealing to recruiters.
- **Number of applications and acceptance rate:** How hard is it to get in? This is mostly a factor of how many applications they receive. If a school is very popular then this means that lots of people value their MBA.
- **Graduation placement rates:** How easy is it to get a job afterwards? A school where MBAs are successful landing jobs means that recruiters value those grads and its students are in demand.
- **Surveys of recent grads, alumni, and recruiters:** How satisfied are people who went here? Or who hired people who did?

The value of the rankings is that they crunch through all that data and give you a list to see, as objectively as possible, which ones are considered better. As schools implement changes to the curriculum to respond to changes in the world of business and better meet the needs of their students, the rankings should change over time to reflect the ones that are doing a good job. It's like Consumer Reports: When you want to buy a new flatscreen TV, you can go check out the big brand name models and see which one performed the best under different conditions. Rankings can be useful because they represent someone else's hard work and analysis. They're like a cheat sheet to which schools meet a minimum standard in performance and which ones excel.

Most of the rankings like **BusinessWeek** and **U.S. News** have the same MBA schools in their Top 20 lists, they're just in a different order. Those lists focus on the U.S. full-time programs. Other lists like **Financial Times** include more international schools. They all use a different methodology, and the order the schools appear in on each list changes each year, but not usually by a whole lot. If you pick any school in any Top 20 list you're going to get a very good education there. Any school that makes it into these lists is a quality university.

Any school in the Top 20 is also going to have competitive admissions. How competitive it is (the acceptance rate) is not determined by the rankings. A school that's lower down the rankings might have a lower admit rate, which is not what you'd expect (Berkeley Haas – only about 13% of applicants admitted). And a higher-ranked school sometimes

has a high admit rate (Chicago Booth – 23% acceptance rate). So the rankings do not tell the whole story.

If you want to be sure of getting in to a good business school, you need to use more than rankings.

An important factor to evaluate as part of your school selection process is School Fit. This is a difficult term to define sometimes; it's in the category of "you know it when you see it." Just like with people, some schools will be a better match to you, based on your interests and personality.

There's an objective side and a subjective side to School Fit:

Objective: Are you a good match for the school based on your profile and goals?

Evaluate: Is your GMAT score in the school's 80% range for accepted students? Does this school offer specialized study in the field you want to pursue?

Subjective: Is this the type of environment that appeals to you? Do you feel comfortable when you interact with the school community?

You can get an answer to the objective side by sitting at your computer and reading the Internet; that will help you cross schools off your list if you're not a good match for each other.

The only way to get an answer to the subjective side is by talking to people. Ask your friends if they know anyone who went there. Attend an information session or a webinar. The more opportunities you have to interact with the school community, the more you'll come to understand what they're about. This level of engagement is the only way to be sure of School Fit. If you do this type of research then you'll be able to prioritize the schools based on the ones you like the best – not just the ones that are higher-ranked.

The main benefit to doing this work is that you will be able to speak in more detail about why you want to go to this school. This question frequently comes up in the interviews and it can help you stand out from the crowd.

Here's how to use rankings and school fit to identify your school targets:

Start Wide. At the beginning of your search, it may feel overwhelming, so it's OK to just use the Top 20 schools.

Use a Filter for Objective Criteria. Make a list of criteria that matter to you: curriculum or specialized majors available, location, size of school. Add on the criteria that matter to the school: 80% GMAT range, work experience. Filter your list of schools and cross out any that don't meet these criteria.

Use a Funnel for Subjective Criteria. If a school meets your objective criteria, it should only be nominated for your Priority List if it meets your Subjective Criteria. The best way to identify what your Subjective Criteria even are is to talk to current students and recent graduates at lots of top schools and see what they valued in the experience and what matters to them in looking back on their MBA. You'll become a more educated consumer that way and you'll know what to look out for. Then you can begin to promote certain schools over others on your list, based on the qualities that you experience when you interact with them.

Rankings are important as a baseline measure of quality in the graduate school world. You can't go by rankings alone to determine which school is right for you. School Fit is critical to determine if the school and you are a good match for each other. Rankings are necessary to begin this process, but School Fit is mandatory to succeed.



Round 1 vs Round 2: The Great Debate

Many have debated the existence of God, the validity of truth, and the intricacies of equality and liberty. And now, there's another great debate to add to the roaring fire of controversy – the Round 1/Round 2 debate. Should you apply Round 1 or Round 2? When is it right to apply early and when should you push it off?

As suspected, there's no simple answer here (otherwise it wouldn't be much of a debate, would it?). Each situation is different and so I can't tell you when to apply. But I can offer some advice that will help you make the best decision for YOU.

Who Should Apply Round 1?

Applicants who have put the final touches on their A+ application in time to submit.

Everyone in the great debate will agree that if you can apply Round 1 to b-school, then you should. So what does it mean in this position? If your application is ready, then you should apply. If you're not at all sacrificing the quality of your application, then you should certainly take advantage of the early advantage that accompanies applying R1.

Actually, that's it. There's only one group of candidates who should apply R1 – those that are ready. Quality is really the most important thing – if your application is not R1-ready, then you shouldn't apply R1. It's as simple as that.

NOTE: R1 is not just for superstars. That means that not everyone who applies R1 is a superstar and not everyone who waits to apply R2 is a loser. If that were the case, then adcoms wouldn't bother looking at R2 applications (not to mention R3 apps, which is a subject for another post).

Who Should Apply Round 2?

Applicants who aren't confident with the quality of their application. This is obviously the converse of what we've been saying before. If you're not ready to apply, then don't submit a mediocre application simply so you can get it in before the R1 buzzer.

Applicants who want to retake the GMAT. Related, if you plan on retaking the GMAT because you weren't satisfied with your score, then you should wait to apply R2.

Applicants who don't have their LORs in hand. If you were slow to the punch requesting letters of recommendation, and you know that your recommenders won't get their part of the job done in time, then you should push off applying until R2 (unless your school says it will wait for letters of recommendation and start processing your application without them). An application with late or missing LORs will just be pushed to a later round, so don't apply before you know that your application will include them.

Applicants who need a bit more time to grow and learn. This applies to growth in the work place and outside it. Sometimes applicants are so close to presenting a strong work history or impressive extracurricular activities or hobbies, but just need some more time

to fully go the distance and reach the goals they've set out for themselves. If you know you'll be promoted or given new work responsibilities in the next month or two, then you may want to wait for R2, especially if you think this new growth will impact your letters of recommendation. Similarly, if you are taking classes or going for a CFA to offset a less than desirable undergraduate GPA, wait until you can show those new shiny As or a pass on the CFA exam.

Yes, it's true that when you wait to apply Round 2, seats have already been given to R1 applicants, and that's why I recommend that if you can apply R1 without sacrificing on quality and you know that all components are ready to go, then you certainly should apply R1. But if your application is not top-notch, then you can assume that you wouldn't be getting one of those R1 seats anyway, and that you'd be better off applying R2.

Let's look at a few examples and determine whether the applicant should apply in each case:

Applicant A:

Applicant A has been struggling with his GMAT and wants to attend a top 20 program. He is unlikely to be admitted with his current score, but wants to apply R1 because the rest of his application is ready to go, and quite impressive at that. Should he apply Round 1 or Round 2?

Answer: Maybe the rest of his application is already impressive; but if he can raise his GMAT and make it even more impressive, then that's what he should do. This applicant should apply R2.

Applicant B:

It is two days before the R1 deadline and Applicant B has all application components ready to submit. She does a quick look over her essay and sees a typo. And then another typo. Then she realizes that maybe she was too quick to call this copy her final copy, and maybe she shouldn't asked a friend/colleague/cousin to review her writing. Should she apply R1 or R2?

Answer: While one typo won't doom an application, several reveal sloppiness. Even if it's one or two days before the deadline, contact [Accepted.com](https://www.accepted.com). If we have availability, we can review your application with an experienced and objective professional eye. Then you can submit R1. If you aren't confident your essays are typo-free or if you have them reviewed and it will take more time than you have to get them into top-notch shape, wait to apply R2. A sloppy application is a dinged application – so don't take that risk!

Applicant C:

Applicant C has good grades, scores, extracurriculars, and work experience. He is in a crowded applicant sub-group and thinks he should apply R2 because (he thinks) the competition will be less intense.

Answer: This is a big mistake. Competition is intense both rounds. This race isn't about timing; it's about differentiating yourself from the competition, improving your profile so that you really stand out, learning about the schools so that you choose the one that will

best suit your goals, and creating essays that show that you're unique despite your profile group. He should submit Round 1 when there are more spots available.

TIP: Don't apply too early within either round. Unless you're applying to an [MBA](#)

[program](#) with rolling admissions (like Columbia for example), then you may actually benefit from applying later in the round rather than earlier. The reason for this is that as you complete more applications and write more essays, you'll get a clearer window into yourself and a strong understanding of what these applications are all about. It would be a shame to come to some sort of breakthrough in application #6 and then realize that you can't tweak applications 1-5 because you sent them in weeks before the deadline. Hold on to completed applications until you've completed them all so that previous applications can benefit from your recent writing experience and greater clarity. Obviously, calendar the deadlines and submit a day or two before.

Why a day or two before the deadline?

You don't want to wait until the 11th hour to hit SUBMIT. If you encounter a problem uploading your application or if servers get overloaded on deadline day, then you'll be sorry. You don't want to miss a deadline on an application that was completed weeks earlier because you waited too long.

We've touched on a lot of subjects here but I'd like to sum up with what has become one of my b-school application mantras: **Apply as early as possible PROVIDED you don't compromise the quality of your application.**

A Guide For The “Over-Represented”

I have worked as an MBA application consultant for eight years in a market replete with candidates who bear strikingly similar profiles. Our challenge has always been to show how each candidate “fits in and stands out.” The “fits in” part is relatively easy, assuming the candidate has the academic, professional and leadership credentials sought by top MBA programs. It is, however, the “stands out” part that has always been the most challenging and the most fun. After working with hundreds of candidates who may resemble one another on paper, I am happy to report that each and every candidate is indeed a unique individual who brings a special value to the MBA applicant table.

The trick, of course, is creating a unique brand that makes you memorable to the AdCom. Instead of branding yourself as yet another engineer, you’ll need to find those amazing things that make you, well, you.

Here are some time-tested tips:

1. Be better than the others. Showcase a better GMAT, a better GPA, more accolades and achievements in similar roles. Show the extraordinary things you have done with your opportunities. Write better essays.
2. Be authentic. There is only one you. Let the reader see who you *are* beyond what you have *done*. Many applications ask you to tell them how you felt and what you thought, in addition to what you did ... so do that. Give them a peek into what makes you tick. It might be more interesting than you think. If you can be super insightful or empathic or funny or gently self-deprecating, even better.
3. Share your background. Don’t worry that you might not look good enough. Schools love a rags-to-riches story. Include stories about your family, wisdom from your immigrant grandfather, how you are the first in your family to go to college. If you are lucky enough to come from an accomplished successful family, show that, too, and how that has influenced you and your choices.
4. Play your strongest hand to create a memorable brand. Whether it’s your outstanding community service record, your professional achievements, or your salsa-dancing hobby, play it up. It will get someone’s attention. This is even better if you can connect your “special thing” to a role you will fill at school. I loved one candidate’s essay that promoted his skit-writing and comedy skills, making him essential for a successful future Folies show. Find 1 or 2 or 3 things that you can contribute but your competitors cannot.
5. Be clever. One smart candidate wrote his INSEAD candid description essay about how you would be able to identify him in a crowded room.

6. Highlight your transferrable skills and knowledge. Show how you've already taken steps towards your short-term goal and thus prove that you are most likely to succeed among all your peers in transitioning to that role.
7. Be creative. Schools like NYU, MIT, and Chicago give you an opportunity to shine. I will never forget one winning PPT presentation. Chicago asked for four slides, and this brilliant candidate presented one NYC-style subway map, highlighting his professional, personal, community service, and academic lines. He was even smart enough to include "tracks under construction" to indicate his future plans and dreams in all areas.
8. Turn weaknesses into strengths that get you noticed. One high-tech candidate for Wharton worked full-time while studying part-time over many years. He started his Optional essay with, "I would like to explain why it took me *only* 9 years to complete my undergraduate degree." Instead of trying to hide it or make excuses, he confronted the issue head-on with a compelling explanation of his unconventional choices.
9. Tell surprising stories that reveal who you are as a person. We tend to dismiss as irrelevant certain aspects of our lives that top business schools will actually find interesting in their never-ending quest for diversity. There was the young Investment banker who volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the court system, protecting children. There was a soft-spoken software developer who did improv on the weekends. And the management consultant with a passion for cosmetology who volunteered to do make-up for young women before their job interviews.
10. Avoid clichés. Please.
11. Remember this: You can't be everything to everybody. What matters most to you cannot be "to become the kind of leader who inspires others to be their best and work with teams to achieve the kind of synergy that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts in order to make an innovating and sustainable impact on the global community." Be who you are



Over-Represented Pool: A Case Study

If you're an Indian applying to business school – especially if you studied engineering in college – you keep hearing that you are at a disadvantage because you are in an over represented applicant pool. What can you do about it?

Let's take the case of Amit. He was 30 when he decided to get his MBA. Class X SSC results were 84%, class XII HSC 90%, B. Eng. First Class. He took the GMAT and got a 700. His schools are Harvard, Kellogg, Booth, Wharton and Columbia, with Tuck as a safety school.

Is there anything else he needs to do or is he ready to apply?

The first thing people look at is the GMAT. He got 700. Everyone says you want to get over 700 so he figures that must be good enough. He wrote his essays in September and he submitted in October.

Amit applied to 10 schools in Round 1. All of his applications were rejected with no interview. He got so depressed that he did not try for Round 2.

Where did he make mistakes?

The one place where everyone has control is the GMAT. Did Amit do everything possible on that test? He has a technical background. Those people are usually the ones who do best. He only took the GMAT one time. A 700 score is good but is it enough?

Maybe not. **It is below the average GMAT for all these schools.** Having a higher GMAT would probably not have changed the results. We know this because he did 10 applications in one month. You can't do a good job on that many applications in such a short time. A higher GMAT would not have fixed the errors he made in rushing his essays. He did not help himself by settling for a 700 score when he knew he could do better.

He also selected some of the most popular schools. He indicated Tuck as a “safety school” even though his GMAT score is below their average. That shows that he was unaware of how competitive it is.

The first step is to make sure that you know why you are picking the schools on your list. This must come through on the application. It takes a lot of time to do this kind of research.

Amit said that wanted to be a consultant. That's a common goal. Did he have what it takes to get there? Did he pick the right schools?

All of these schools are good for consulting. There is a lot of competition for these schools though. Amit needed to show how he is a unique individual and he needed to use the application to bring out his work experience. He is a Team Lead at work and he thought that was enough for leadership because it says so on his resume. He needs more than the title of Team Leader. He should have brought in the examples of

leadership and results. He started a NGO and he thought was good. He didn't talk about the project in a way that helped his chances. He just dumped information in an essay.

He also was not realistic with those schools. He has an average profile for an Indian candidate. The GMAT and the university record are not a great combination. He is good, just not great. He is like everyone else. All the schools on his list are above average for qualifications required. Amit needed to do more to get into a Top 10 school or he needed to adjust his targets to include some other schools too.

He is also worried about his age. It is not as easy to get in to a Top MBA program in your 30s. He is not too old but he needs to work hard to make it happen.

In the spring he decided that his job was a dead end and he had to get an MBA. **He tried again.**

He took a new approach. He found out how much **the recommendations matter**. Amit has worked in a technical environment for a long time and his manager does not write well. He realized that the manager did not do a good job on his answers last year. Amit decided to ask a previous manager for the recommendation now because he will do a better job of describing Amit's work. If your recommender has never done a project like this before for someone else then you need to make sure they understand what to do and how important it is.

The essays matter too. Many technical people do not know how to answer the questions in the school essays. Amit rushed with the essays and he now knows that they were not that good. The essays need time. Getting help from reliable sources is the right strategy. Don't have your mother read your essays. Try to get help from your friends who have gotten into business school already. You don't need to pay for expensive consulting, only do your research well enough. Read a lot. Study the questions. Go onto the school chats and read for help here on GMAT Club. The essays are not as easy as they might seem.

When Amit gave the GMAT again he got a 720. That score made him more confident. He also looked again at schools. He decided that other schools like CMU Tepper are better for him because he wants to do technical consulting. Tepper has an average GMAT of 698. Amit's 720 is a lot higher. He also did a lot of research and the Tepper people were all very friendly. He didn't get the same response from the other schools.

He applied to 3 schools in Round 1 and was accepted at Tepper. He was wait-listed at one other school but he decided to go to Tepper because he liked everything about it from his research. Maybe he could have gotten in with his 700 GMAT score but he knows that he made it easier to get accepted with a high score and he learned a lot from the first applications to help be successful in the end.

What should he have done differently the first time?

- A higher GMAT score in a later round is often a better tradeoff for applicants like Amit. It doesn't help to apply earlier if your profile is not as strong as it could be.
- The recommendations need to be chosen carefully. Having someone who can write well and answer the questions with details about you is very important.

- The essays are not simple. Amit started as soon as his GMAT was done in June. He spent all summer on the essays this time.

- Selecting schools matters more than anything. If you are not a good fit then they won't let you in. Amit researched what they wanted and he was able to tell them about himself and his work experience in the essays a lot better.

Amit's story is very common. There are a lot of mistakes for Indians that don't have to be made. Applications take a long time if you are going to do them right. You do not have to have a cure for cancer to get into business school. You can be a regular guy you just need to do more work than you might expect to show admissions committee that you are serious. It doesn't matter that you are coming from an over represented pool. It matters that you do a great job and give admissions everything that you can. An “average” profile won't work if you want to go to a great school.

A guide for International applicants with a note on Indian and Chinese applicants



Hey there, my friendly International applicants, who bring diversity, great food and a global outlook to our US B-schools!

So, you are thinking about going to the US for an MBA? Great! Getting an MBA in the US (or from one of the great programs in Europe or Asia) can totally boost your career. But, before you apply, here are some thoughts we'd like to share from our 8-years and 25,000 applications-worth of experience at Admissionado.

Is it advantageous to be an international student?

Not for US schools. In US b-schools, Americans make up between 60-70% of every class. And that means that, if you are an International applicant, you are vying for fewer spots than your American comrades. And there are more of you! For [European schools](#), which tend to have diversity rates of 90%+, being an International applicant matters far less (though it's still not necessarily "an advantage.")

Does it matter where I'm from?

Yyyyp. Basically, when you apply, you WILL be pooled with other people from your country, and even possibly the same region. So if you come from a place where there are lots and lots and lots of applicants (India or China, notably), [things will be tougher for you](#). There will be more applicants, test scores will be higher, and it will be harder to impress the adcoms. If, on the other hand, you come from a small struggling African economy, for example (Angola, let's say), or a country from which people rarely go to business school (Uzbekistan), then your pool is small, and the diversity that you will offer the incoming class will be greater. And that means you are more "desirable" to the adcom. But that *doesn't* mean that coming from a small country is enough to get you in.

Other than that, Western Europeans tend to do quite well when applying to US B-schools and vice-versa. This probably has lots to do with the similarities between cultures, economies and lifestyles. But, basically, your chances would be the same as at home.

Does my Undergraduate School matter?

Very much. If you don't go to one of the top schools in your country, Top 10 b-schools will likely be out of range. For Indian students, for example, the large majority of incoming students in Top 10 programs will come from IITs (or also the NITs); In China it will be schools in the Top 10 like Fudan, Tsinghua, Peking, etc. The same applies to all countries.

This is not prejudice, of course. There are plenty of AMAZING people that come from schools outside of the Top 10. But for the Adcoms, who obviously don't know everything about every school in every country, relying on the in-country selectivity makes their job of choosing what they see to be the best students much easier.

Will having a Green Card, or International experience help?

Yes! If you have a Green Card and are applying to the US it can help. Why? Well, for one, it just makes you a lot more hireable (and a lot more easily hireable), because companies don't need to worry about sponsoring you, and so improves your chances. But even if you don't, if you have *some* experience in the US (or the West in general) the schools will

like this because you have International experience (yay!), and they will feel more confident that you know how to navigate the Western society, US culture, and the job market. International work experience (especially leadership experience) is generally more valuable than international academic experience, but every little bit helps.

Does my being International in any way change my goals?

Of course. Your goals need to be realistic no matter who you are. And you need to verify certain things to ensure your goals are logical and plausible. For example, if you are International, you aren't likely to land that aerospace/defense industry job in the US and maybe not that Oil/Gas job either.

So be aware of the market conditions of your industry in the country where you will do your MBA (and in the region too).

Also, if you propose to return to your country (which can make for great goals), make sure that your voyage to the US (or wherever) makes sense in terms of your [goals and trajectory](#). So if, for example, your goal is to work for the World Bank and you have European banking experience but want to understand the American markets and work there for five years before you return, then great! Everything makes sense, and it's all planned out! But if you have Chinese finance experience and your goal is to go back to China and work for the same company you're at now... well, that's a tougher sell to an American adcom.

I'm Chinese/Indian, what do I need to know before I apply?

The first thing is that Asian students tend to study a lot and score amazingly high on the GMAT (far higher than American students). So what that means is that when you are looking at the average GMAT of your target school, keep in mind that the average GMAT coming from *your applicant pool* is likely 20-30 points higher.

The second thing is that there are LOTS of you. Which means that the schools will get LOTS of similar applications. Which means that if you want to have a shot you will have to be UNIQUE. This can mean anything – from taking risks in how you write your essays; to having an amazing job, fantastic leadership, crazy stories, unbelievable startup experience; etc. The application and the essays you write are the *KEY* to getting in, and if you can stick out in the adcoms' mind, you have done half of the work.

And even if you *aren't* Chinese or Indian, being unique, original, and having a broad range of experience and interests will help any and every International candidate.

Oh, and one more thing: when you get to b-school, take advantage of the diversity around you. Get out of your comfort zone and [dive right into the culture that's around you!](#)

Need even more? Got it!

[Advice for Indian Applicants](#)

[MORE advice for Indian Applicants!](#)

[Advice for Chinese Applicants](#)

How to Pick Between Full Time, Part Time, Online, and Executive MBA Programs!

For some applicants, the decision is black and white. For others, the grey areas are significant. And others don't really know the difference to begin with. So the great question is, how do you pick between different types of MBA programs? There are a lot of things to think about such as your goals, budget, age, needs, and options. That's what makes this decision such a personal one – there is no ONE answer. No RIGHT answer. It simply has to make sense for you. Because an MBA is a significant investment and you don't want to make a decision that leads you down the wrong path. You only do this once – so it's worth doing correctly!

So what we thought would be useful is a quick overview of the types of programs followed by a short “profile” of a type of applicant that might find this option right for them. That doesn't mean that's the ONLY profile. It's illustrative. So don't freak out if you don't match one of them – figure out the right path forward for you!

The Full Time MBA (Average age of program 25-30)

Ah, the creme de la creme of MBA programs with a price tag to match. It's a 1 – 2 year investment that takes you out of the job market and then, hopefully, throws you back in with a huge splash. That's the goal, at least! So what's the good and bad?

The Good

This is an amazing opportunity to branch out, rebrand yourself, explore different things, immerse yourself in the MBA bubble, and shift/accelerate your career. You make a whole new set of friends who are all on the same journey and gives you the most time to build an incredible network that you can leverage after school. You also get amazing career opportunities and for some fields, such as high finance or consulting, this is one of the best ways to make that shift. It's also probably the last time in your life that you'll take a year or two off to just grow and develop!

The Bad

First off, the price tag is massive. Tuition + cost of living + opportunity cost = \$\$\$,\$\$\$\$. That can be a tough pill to swallow for a lot of folks. You also take time off from your career. The (valid) argument is that even though you're taking time off that doesn't mean you're falling behind. But still, time off is time off. Also, there is a risk here. If you go with the goal of switching into a specific career and you can't make it happen, you've failed on the single most criteria you had for yourself. You'll land on your feet, but if you go to bschool to become a banker and don't...well, that'll be rough.

Profile

Joe is a management consultant. He works at a top tier firm and, after three years on the road, he's ready to try something new. He really wants to give banking a shot but he also wants to see what else is out there. He's willing to invest in the process and, let's be honest, he wants a little time off too. His firm is sponsoring him but if he's successful in his switch, the cost will fall to him. A full time MBA is a great way for him to get what he wants professionally and personally. He'll also need that summer internship to make the switch.

The Part Time MBA (Average age of program 27 – 33)

What if you're happy where you are or aren't looking for a complete career etch-a-sketch? Or what if you have a family and simply can't afford the loss of income? Or maybe your employer will help fund the degree. For a lot of people, the part time MBA is a really good option!

The Good

Firstly, this option fits life, in general, much better. You don't have to press pause. It also provides access to the academics and curriculum component of the MBA that is such an important aspect of the experience. So if your goal is career acceleration or to pick up a new set of skills without the time off and price tag of the full time MBA, this is the option for you!

The Bad

There are three main downsides to the part time MBA. For one, it is exhausting. You work all day, you go to school at night / on the weekend, and you still have the rest of life to deal with. Secondly, you are limited by the options available to you. For those lucky enough to live close to a highly ranked program, that isn't an issue. But for the rest, unless you're willing to fly to Chicago or California every week, you'll have to find a program near you. And sometimes those options aren't ideal. Lastly, your focus will be on academics. There isn't as much time for social activities or a focus on community involvement. Sure, there are things to do, but that isn't the focus.

Profile

Priya is a project manager at a leading technology company in the Chicago area but her career is starting to plateau. She has a background in engineering and simply lacks the business skills she needs to make the next jump. She is also married with a young child so heading off for a full time MBA isn't an option. Her employer has a pretty generous tuition reimbursement program and she wants to take advantage of it. She has two great options in her area with Kellogg and Booth. A part time MBA would meet her personal requirements while giving her the business education she needs to push her career forward.

The Online / Distance MBA (Average age of program varies)

This option is pretty similar to the part time program except that the majority of your MBA takes place at a distance (obviously). Many programs, such as the University of Florida, are incorporating in-person components too in an effort to ensure students meet and interact. But overall, this program is on your terms, is really flexible, and might not even require a GMAT. It'll take about as long as a part time program too.

Profile

Ashley is an engineering graduate from a top ranked undergrad institution and is still early in her career. She wants to pursue her MBA but doesn't want to go the full time route for personal reasons. She also doesn't have access to top ranked part time options where she lives. But there is a great online MBA program with an in-person component in the state next to hers. She's also getting employer support so this option makes a lot of financial sense too!

The Executive MBA (Average age of program 35 – 40)

The option with one the highest ROIs, the EMBA is quickly gaining popularity as more and more professionals later in their career begin to see the value in higher education. But there's no career changing here. These programs are designed to help experienced senior level business folks fill in knowledge gaps and focus on executive level issues in the business world. You need relevant experience and a fair amount of it. By the way, don't let the name fool you – you don't need to be an executive to participate but do remember who the target audience is. Even though the price can sometimes be a bit steep, the value is definitely there. And you get access to a network of senior executives / managers which can be powerful!

Profile

Cheng is a manager with a global infrastructure solutions company and his company's leadership wants to see him grow within the company. They have spoken to him about pursuing his EMBA and are willing to support the initiative financially. Cheng wants an MBA worth the time, money, and effort which a top ranked EMBA can provide. The network he will develop will also help him in his future roles within his company!

So there you have it – four great options to pursue your MBA. What are you waiting for? Get started on your applications today!

How to Deal with a Low GPA

A less than stellar undergraduate GPA is a scenario that many face when applying to MBA programs. And this happens for many reasons. Some people get to university and explore their social freedom for the first time, some folks switch majors after realizing their first direction was not right, some students take a while to find their academic groove, and some schools are known to grade more harshly than other institutions.

Be an Impartial Analyst:

The critical question is how low is low?

Mean GPAs have gotten higher at the top 10 schools and the distribution around the mean is tighter versus years back. It used to be that you could have a 2.9 gpa and still get into an elite MBA program—but that's getting harder to pull off and there are increasingly fewer outliers. So take a sober look at your targeted schools in terms of GPA and the reported GPA % distribution and don't ignore what you find. You may see some blog posts floating around with authors talking about how they got into HBS with a 2.7 GPA. Know that this is rare and don't fool yourself into thinking odds are in your favor. I see clients each season over shoot on their targeted schools and you need to have a balanced slate of schools to maximize your chances. As you move into the top 10-20 schools, there can be more wiggle GPA room, but even average GPAs for these schools have become more impressive over time.

So be an impartial analyst as you research your schools. That is what an MBA would do!

Explaining a Low GPA:

The optional essay is often a great place to play offense and explain your academic performance. While it's rarely a good idea to fully blame extenuating circumstances for your low GPA, some explanation may be warranted. People have health problems and family deaths, some applicants are varsity athletes with crazy schedules, some students have to deal with coming to a country for the first time and performing academically in a non-native language, and some have to work full time to pay for school. There are some understandable reasons why applicants can underperform, and rather than just letting an admissions officer draw their own quick conclusion, you should provide some color on the situation. Keep it concise and don't blame multiple things. Take some responsibility as well, and admit you could have handled the situation more maturely.

What Can You Do?:

Clients always want to know how they can perhaps counteract a low GPA. As I have argued above, this is getting harder to pull off given competition has become so fierce and the mean scores figure into the rankings. The Internet has democratized the process of researching schools and getting application tips, and high quality folks from all over the globe are targeting Top 20 programs. So a low GPA is more of a liability, but you can take action steps:

- *Killing the GMAT.* Getting a great, balanced score on the GMAT is the best revenge. And you should try to score above the mean GMAT for your targeted schools. The GMAT is the great equalizer, as it lets adcoms compare applicants who come from very different schools and learning cultures. So double down on the GMAT, get a private tutor, and push your applications to Round 2 if necessary to have more time for this critical exam.
- *Take a Class.* Maybe you did not do so well in Statistics in undergrad. Take that class again, perhaps at a well-known university in their extension offerings. I still

prefer a physical class (like you will do at your MBA), but some kind of hybrid online class is fine too. Some of the major schools also have more and more online offerings (on campus and on line)—so if you are targeting Booth and live in Chicago, why not take a business relevant class on their campus. Or check out HBS' CORE programs if your professional experience has not exposed you to a broad business fluency. Not everybody passes those HBS courses so getting an "honors" from HBS is another way to show that your undergraduate performance is not the whole story.

- *Look at a Part-Time Program.* Some applicants simply won't be able to make up for a low GPA. Applying to lower ranked schools with solid recruiting in your desired field or applying to a part time program can be a great option. Some of the top schools (Haas, NYU Booth...) have part time programs and the bar is generally more forgiving on the GPA issue. At least for now.

If you are unsure about your GPA situation, talk to a current MBA student or an admissions consultant. Getting outside perspectives can help. For example, many applicants don't know that for most schools, only US reported GPAs figure into reported class profile averages—this can help you if you are a foreign applicant with a less than stellar academic record.

So don't worry yourself into inaction. Get informed and make a plan!

At MBA Admit.com, we work with many candidates who gained their undergraduate or graduate degrees from universities outside of the United States. A very common concern among such candidates is how they should convert their GPAs to the U.S. 4.0 scale.

This is a concern that oftentimes causes candidates great alarm. When candidates perform a straight mathematical conversion, their GPA sometimes looks as if it is greatly deficient, amounting to a C- or D+ grade point average on the U.S. 4.0 scale. But, if your conversion looks like a weak GPA, there is hope! We at MBA Admit.com have helped many candidates whose converted GPAs looked absolutely dismal – even less than 1.0 – to gain admission to Top-10 MBA programs. Here are key points to keep in mind.

Internal Metrics: The Top Schools Know Their Stuff!

A first and very important point is that most top MBA programs in the United States will have received applications from other students from your school over the decades. Some of them include candidates from over 50-70 countries in each of their incoming classes. They will have kept track of the GPAs in your local GPA scale and therefore they will have their own internal metrics to refer to when assessing how strong your GPA is. If at your school, for instance, a 55% represents a top performance, it likely will not matter if that translates into a B average according to a particular business school's website conversion chart. Most business schools will know whether your GPA is a top performance because they will have statistics on graduates from your college with whom to compare you.

In fact, many top MBA programs do not ask you to convert your GPA. This is because, as noted, they already have information about how to interpret it. You need not convert your GPA to the U.S. 4.0 scale unless the MBA program to which you are applying has asked you to.

To give you a taste of what is required by top MBA programs, let's take a look at the 2014-2015 instructions of seven top MBA programs. In recent years, this has been the policy of some of the top MBA programs:

Harvard: Do not convert your foreign GPA, report it in the local scale

Stanford: Do not convert your foreign GPA, report it in the local scale

Wharton: Do not convert your foreign GPA, report it in the local scale

MIT: Do not convert your foreign GPA, report it in the local scale

Columbia: Convert your GPA, conversion table provided

As Stanford explains on its website as of May 27, 2015:

Many applicants worry that we may not know that lower grades in one concentration, university, or educational system may be equivalent to the strongest at another. We do. A grade point average (or rank in class, or actual grade) without context, however, is not of greatest importance to us.

By focusing on your achievements in context, we evaluate how you have excelled within your individual academic environment and how you have taken advantage of the opportunities available to you in your school and community.

Report your undergraduate grade point average and the scale used by your institution. Only courses for credit toward your first bachelor's degree count in your GPA. Report/calculate your GPA to the best of your ability even if your institution does not list it on your transcript. Do not convert your college/university's scale. If necessary, you may explain how you calculate your GPA in the "Additional Information" section.

As Wharton explains on its website as of May 27, 2015:

<http://mba.wharton.upenn.edu/admissions/admissions-faqs/>

Students reporting grades from institutions that do not evaluate academic performance on a 4.0 GPA scale should NOT convert their scores to a GPA. Report your scores or grades as your university lists them in your official transcripts, including an explanation of the grading scheme if needed. Keep in mind that we have students from more than 70 countries in our program and have broad expertise in grading methods around the world.

As MIT explains on its website as of May 27, 2015:

You do not need to convert your GPA for the online application. Simply enter in the grading system used by your school. We are familiar with the various grading systems and can evaluate it on our end. No need to try to translate an international GPA into a US one.

When a Conversion Table is Provided

What if your target school has asked you to convert your GPA and provides a scale to employ on their website? Use it. Even if your GPA does not look favorable after the conversion, don't worry. The schools in most cases know how to interpret your GPA, as noted above. A clear example is Columbia Graduate School of Business. They provide a scale on their website. For the 2015-2016 admissions year, this is the conversion prescribed on the Columbia Business School Website for translating a GPA from a 100 point or percentage scale to a 4.0 scale. See <https://www8.gsb.columbia.edu/programs-admissions/doctoral-program/admissions/apply-now/application-instructions>

Please use this table to calculate your GPA on a 4.0 scale:

Percentage	U.S. Grade Equiv.
90–100	4.0
80–89	3.3
70–79	2.3

60–69	1.3
Below 60	0

But don't worry if your GPA looks horrible after the conversion! At MBA Admit.com, we have worked with many candidates whose GPAs appeared to convert to 1.8 GPA on the U.S. scale and they still gained admission to Columbia! This is because Columbia knows how to interpret the GPA.

Your Honors

Another important point is that your level of honors is going to provide the schools with further guidance with regard to your undergraduate performance. Did you graduate First Class with Distinction? Second Class? For some top MBA programs, if graduated with Second Class honors and not with First Class or First Class with Distinction honors, your candidacy might not be viable if you are coming from a country like India. For the same top MBA programs, graduating with high Second Class honors (2:1) in Britain might be perfectly fine for admission. The honors levels mean different things in different countries, and different things in different universities in the same country. Most top MBA programs know how to interpret your level of distinction.

Your Ranking

Your class ranking can also play a role in how business schools see your undergraduate performance. Were you ranked third in your class of 50? Were you in the top 10? Top 15%? Top 20%? Often this is noted on your transcript, and if your ranking is favorable, you should draw the admission committee's attention to this.

Using a Broadly Accepted Conversion Scale

Finally, for candidates who must convert their GPAs because a particular business school has asked them to, but the business school has not provided a specific conversion chart to use, it may be the case that a straight mathematical conversion may not work best for you. You should compare a straight mathematical conversion to what is suggested from broadly used and respected organizations such as the World Education Services (WES). The WES conversion method is widely used and well known. On the WES website, located at <http://www.wes.org/gradeconversionguide/>, you can select your relevant country and view the conversion chart promoted by WES for candidates who received their degrees from your country. For example, as of May 27, 2015, this was the suggested WES conversion for candidates with degrees from India:

Grading Scale

Scale	U.S. Grade Equiv.
70-100	A
50-69	B
35*-49	C
0-32	F

* At selected institutions, a lower grade may be considered passing.

As of May 27, 2015, this was the suggested WES conversion for candidates with degrees from China:

Grading Scale

Scale 1	Scale 2	Grade Description	U.S. Grade Equiv.
85-100	5	Excellent	A
75-84	4	Good	B
60-74	3	Average/Fair	C
0-59	2	Fail	F

Grading scale may vary. Please refer to grading scale on transcript.

Hopefully this information can help take anxiety out of the foreign GPA conversion issue as you move forward with applications!



Extracurricular Activities

You should not be fearing the Extracurricular section on your resume/essays but instead leverage it. We'll walk through a few ideas and suggestions. However, you should customize them to your particular situation and story. Use these experiences to prove your point, show the person you are, illustrate what you believe in, and make you unique and special.

Why Are Extracurricular Activities Valuable?

Although it is largely dependent on your specific application, there are a number of benefits - use them!

- Relevant EC (even loosely tied to your long term goal) can demonstrate the commitment to your field/goals adcoms are looking for. E.g. if you said in your apps you were really passionate about the environment but have never done anything about it, then perhaps you just like to say things....
- On the other hand even irrelevant experience can show your personality
- Your extracurricular (non job related) experience can help you strengthen your leadership picture. Even if you were a troop leader for boy scouts or in charge of a local clean up effort - all of that counts not only on paper but also will speak loudly through your application. But please do not make stuff up - admissions team will see right through that
- Someone you have volunteered with or worked together on a project may end up being a good candidate for a Letter of Recommendation
- You can use extracurricular activities to explain a few things such as an employment gap or poor academic record during one of the semesters
- Extra curricular activities (whether volleyball or volunteering, or political work) can enrich your life, give you a new perspective, and contribute to your life in general
- Community work can be incredibly substantial, especially if you have a long term goal to work in the non profit. Make sure your EC is relevant to the non profit industry and even a small stint can come to be quite useful there.
- Even 2-3 months of community work can work pretty positively in your application. It makes you a human being, shows your passions and interests and gives an interesting take on your character by taking a necessary break from GPA figures, GMAT score and WE achievements.

I did not volunteer anywhere. But I do spend 10 hours a week helping with X/Y/Z. Is that EC?

- YES, they can be. These X/Y/Z can add a lot more to your profile and say much more about you than a couple of weeks of community service could ever do really.
- The goal of the AdCom is to admit individuals who will support a vibrant campus community and step into leadership positions. In other words, as admissions officers consider each applicant, they ask themselves “what’s in it for our school?”
- One misconception is that your extracurricular activities have to be altruistic. Admissions committee members and admissions consultants will tell you business schools are looking for applicants to participate in activities for which they are truly passionate. One of the successful applicants to Ross, was a really good DJ who was invited to many parties and made side income by being a DJ in some of the hippest parties in Madrid. As a matter of fact, Ross even advertised this on their website to encourage R2 2011 applicants. Another real applicant took care of exotic animals confiscated by the zoo and it worked out great for her too.

OMG. I have nothing. What can I do now?

[From the Rhyme's MBA Guide](#)

I think the best way to think of extracurricular activities is to think of them as activities you engage in outside of work. This might include hobbies (e.g. restoring old cars, hiking the mountains), sports (softball team, etc.) more formal programs (being a big brother, volunteering at shelters, being part of your university recruiting efforts etc.). As you might imagine, leadership oriented involvement is more meaningful in any of these – so if you go hiking, do you act as the guide? If you volunteer at shelters do you take on a key role?

- So the first step is to stop and think about things in those terms – and see if anything jumps out.
- If you are part of some extracurricular program and want to try to take on a more leadership oriented role, just ask. In fact, you might even be able to make the role related to your goals – I know one candidate who approached a

local dog shelter and offered to help them revisit their financials and marketing materials. They had plenty of people willing to look after the pets, but no one with business acumen to help out.

- Assuming neither of those options worked – and the problem is purely a lack of activities completely... we need to get creative. Start with your alma mater and see if there are roles you can take on as an alumnus. (Many schools will have formal alumni recruiting efforts, even at the undergraduate level). If that fails to lead somewhere meaningful, try browsing <http://meetup.com> or <http://www.craigslist.org> for local interests groups. You can either start your own (which isn't free, but it's a small price to pay in the grand scheme), or you can join another group for free. Odds are, you'll find something on meetup.com (everything from dumpster diving to xylophone fan clubs seem to exist). Either way, you can quickly become involved in something of consequence. Assuming

neither of those ideas work out, start calling local charities and see how you can get involved. Admittedly, none of these strategies can fix a lack of extracurricular involvement in years past, but some involvement is still better than none.

- Sign up for Toastmasters. It is a public speaking club that almost immediately can provide you with a number of leadership opportunities during the weekly meetings and give you a role of a VP within 3 months. It will help you with public speaking and interviewing, as well as with leadership and EC experience. Many people in the club can probably recommend other interesting local opportunities - they tend to be in the know
- Do what you believe. You don't have to be a Mother Theresa. If you think the world needs more capitalists, find a local organization that teaches kids financial wisdom (google for one or search or see about starting it). Or if you want to save the world, you can probably do that as well in some way. AdComs love people with strong convictions (nobody likes a flip-flopper without a personality)
- You are welcome to get involved with GMAT Club. We welcome [moderator applicants](#) and frankly will consider any crazy idea. Just contact us.

More discussions on GMATClub about Extracurricular Activities:
[teach-me-about-extracurricular-activities-4-questions-127778.html](#)
[extracurricular-activities-63220.html](#) [how-important-are-extracurricular-activities-80684.html](#)

How to Craft Your Resume

Most of you will be required to submit a resume at some point during the MBA application process. We have below an overview of the resume portion of your application. If you are looking for more in-depth information, you can visit the [Stacy Blackman Resume Guide](#), and we can also answer questions in this thread.

Resume Overview

In general, the purpose of the resume is to provide someone with a quick snapshot of who you are, professionally. A well designed resume should be easy to scan, and should tell a chronological story of an individual's professional and academic development. When you are completing your resume, it is important to keep in mind your audience. The reader of your MBA resume will be different than the person hiring you for an investment banking job or an engineering position, as the MBA reader will be looking for things that are important to an MBA program.

MBA programs are looking for individuals who will be successful as leaders and in highly collaborative work environments. They are seeking skills that are transferable to success in any industry. In addition to telling the chronological story of your academic and professional career, much of your information should be focused on supporting these things:

1. Showcasing leadership
2. Showcasing other "MBA relevant" skills such as teamwork, collaboration, innovation
3. Demonstrating growth and progression

Format Specifics

We fervently believe that in almost every case, the resume should be one page only. One inch margins are ideal, but margins are one area where you can play around with spacing.

Typical fonts for a resume are Times New Roman, Verdana, Cambria and Arial, with Times New Roman being the most common. The business resume is not the place to experiment with fancy fonts.

Professional Section

The professional section of your resume summarizes and chronologically illustrates your career. In most (not all, but most) cases, the career progress is also most important to MBA admissions representatives and that is what they will want to focus on and discuss. There are several key questions to ask when you are considering what to include in the professional section:

1. Is the work meaningful? Can you leverage this position to illustrate a specific skill set that you acquired or an accomplishment that is important?
2. Does it support your career path? Does it support your future goals?
3. How long were you at the job?
4. How recent was it?

With each of your positions, each point should lead with a strong and interesting action verb. Another rule to keep in mind is to quantify results as much as possible. While it is nice to know that you created a new marketing program, it is also important to know that, as an example, the new marketing program increased awareness by 40%

When completing this section, remember the qualities that MBA admissions committees are looking for. Below are five of these qualities:

- Leadership
- Diversity
- Self-Awareness
- Intellectual Horsepower
- Emotional Intelligence

In addition to the above, it is always great to show that you are progressing in your career. You need to make it clear that over the course of your career, you have picked up new skills, assumed new responsibilities, developed as an individual and that all of this growth has been recognized by others.

Education Section

The Education section should include very basic information about your educational background. It should show a chronology of schools attended, areas of study and significant activities and accomplishments. As with the rest of the resume, it should be easy to scan, so that someone who is becoming acquainted with your background can very easily identify names of schools and dates and start to piece together your background.

Additional Information Section

The Additional Information section is a brief, informal section which encompasses everything that you want to include on your resume that does not fit into the other sections. This should be very brief, not more than five to six lines at the bottom of your resume, with two to three lines being more appropriate.

If you do not have essential information that you are anxious to include, you can use this section to outline activities and interests. It is not uncommon to see two sentences at the bottom, such as this:

Interests include skiing, surfing, drawing and world travel. Speak Mandarin and Spanish fluently.

Always keep in mind that this is the “extras” section, and as such it should be kept very brief. While this may seem obvious to some readers, we have reviewed resumes that boast of titles such as “Beer Drinking Champion”. This type of content is not desirable for your resume. The following are 3 examples of what not to include:

- Controversial Political Affiliations
- Long List of Anything
- Too Many Hobbies or Interests

Start Working On That Resume

We at [mbaMission](#) encourage candidates to get as much “noise” out of the way as possible before business schools begin releasing their essay questions and they have to start writing applications. We want our applicants to have the freedom and time to reflect on their experiences, formally and thoroughly brainstorm, choose ideas, prepare outlines and then focus on crafting powerful essays. Essentially, we want them to be unfettered as they engage in what is, for many, one of the most significant creative challenges they will ever face.

So, a simple step such as preparing your resume now will allow you to concentrate better on the other elements of your application in the future. By working on your resume now—a process that can require several rounds of revisions—you can dedicate the time to do so at a more leisurely pace, before “crunch time” hits. Further, you will lay the foundation for brainstorming for your essays later, by reminding yourself of your most significant accomplishments.

We recognize that you may achieve additional accomplishments in the next few months, of course. However, we still suggest that you update your resume now and then revisit and amend it as needed one to two weeks before your application deadlines.

In your resume, make sure that you are showcasing your accomplishments, not merely stating responsibilities. When only your responsibilities are presented—with no accompanying results—the reader has no understanding of whether you were effective in the role you are highlighting. For example, consider the following resume entry, in which only responsibilities are offered:

2005–Present Home Products Group, The Jason Company Cincinnati,
Ohio Brand Manager

- Responsible for managing a \$10M media campaign, supervising a staff of five junior brand managers, monitoring daily sales volumes and ensuring the consistent supply of product from five production facilities in three countries.

This kind of entry leaves the reader wondering, “Was the media campaign successful? Did the staff of five progress? Did sales volumes increase? Did the supply of products reach its destination?” When this one large bullet point is instead broken down into individual bulleted entries that elaborate on each task and show clear results, the reader learns not just about the candidate’s responsibilities, but also about that person’s ultimate effectiveness and successes. Consider the following example:

2008–Present The Jason Company Cincinnati,
Ohio Brand Manager

- Initiated \$10M television/Internet “Island Vacation” promotion introducing new Shine brand detergent, surpassing first-year sales targets within three months.

- Mentored and supervised five junior brand managers, each of whom was promoted to brand manager (company traditionally promotes 25%)

- Analyzed daily sales volumes and identified opportunity to increase price point in Midwest, resulting in 26% margin improvement and \$35M in new profits.
- Secured “safety supply” of vital chemicals from alternate suppliers, ensuring 99% order fulfillment.

By comparing the first entry for The Jason Company with the second, you can see how much more effective an accomplishment-driven resume is than one that simply states responsibilities.

You should present quantifiable results in your resume whenever possible, because such results clearly convey your success in the actions you undertook. However, in some instances, you simply cannot quantify your success. In such cases, you can instead demonstrate nonquantifiable or even potential results. Consider the following examples:

- Persuaded management to review existing operations; currently leading Manufacturing Review Committee, which will table its final report in June 2012.
- Established divisional continuing education series, noted on review as “crucial” and “game changing.”
- Initiated biweekly “Tuesday at Five” team social event, resulting in enhanced workplace morale.

In each of these sample bullets, the results of the writer’s actions are not measurable, but they are nonetheless important. The accomplishments, while “soft,” are conveyed as clearly positive.

Ideally, your resume should be only one page long; admissions committees generally expect and appreciate the conciseness of this format. If you choose to submit a two-page resume or longer, your reader may have difficulty scanning it and identifying (and remembering) important facts. With these space constraints in mind, we offer two fairly straightforward “space saver” ideas:

1. Do not include a mission statement at the beginning of your resume. Your mission in this case is to get into the MBA program to which you are applying—and, of course, the admissions committee already knows this!
2. Only your name should appear at the top of your resume. You do not need to include your address, email address, gender, marital status, etc., because these data will all be provided in your application form.

Please, resist the urge to make your resume fit on one page by shrinking your font or margins. Your font should be no smaller than 10 point type, and your margins should be no smaller than 1” on either side and 0.75” at the top and bottom. Rather than trying to fit too much information on the page, commit yourself instead to showcasing only your most important accomplishments that tell your story best.



10 Fatal Flaws in Your Resume

Done correctly, your MBA resume can open the door to a top b-school acceptance; done incorrectly, this one-page summary can kill your chances. In this post we'd like to highlight the 10 toxic mistakes of a poisonous MBA resume.

1. You Improperly Prioritize

Here's why your resume is more important than you realize: Often it's the first element of your application package that the adcom look at. It also can determine whether the reader will review the rest of your application with interest or out of a sense of obligation. A strong, impressive resume will pique the reader's interest and inspire him/her to read on with an optimistic eye; a sloppy resume will do the opposite – it will demotivate your reader to view your application favorably. In short, you want to make a positive first impression; you don't want to turn your reader off.

2. You Stick with Basic Descriptions

Adcom readers are looking for career progression. A list of jobs, titles, and job descriptions will tell the adcom little about the projects you've completed, how you have excelled and transcended the average, and the impact you've had on your professional surroundings. Basic job descriptions just won't cut it. You need to bring out where you have gone above and beyond the expected and ordinary and when you have really contributed.

3. Your MBA Resume Looks like a Job Resume

Your [MBA resume](#) should not include technical, industry-specific jargon that you may appropriately include on a job resume. Relatedly, ditch the "objective" line/section at the top of your resume. The adcoms know your objective – gaining acceptance to b-school. Don't waste time and space stating the obvious.

4. You Don't Stick to Formatting Standards

Follow the resume standards set by your target school. The program's career services department may provide additional information on how you should standardize your resume, including tips on standardizing punctuation, formatting, and tenses. For example, if your school's format doesn't italicize job titles, then you shouldn't take the liberty to do so either. Furthermore, if your school doesn't ask for a pink font and a frilly border (which it won't!), then don't decorate your resume with these embellishments.

5. You Don't Edit Extensively

Remember what we said above about a sloppy resume? It's time to repeat that here: A sloppy resume will portray you as a sloppy person, and NOT the type of person admissions readers seek. In addition to running your word processor's spell check and

grammar check, be sure to review your resume with your eyes and ears so you can see and hear errors that the computerized error-checkers may have missed. Better yet, borrow the eyes and ears of another person or two to further ensure that your resume is letter-perfect, properly formatted, and accurate.

6. You Go into Info Overload

Don't offer information that will appear in other components of your application, like your GMAT score, GPA, education background, and references. Only provide information relevant to your achievements, skills, and career progression. Needless to say, information like height, weight, date of birth, high school grades, and relationship status should be omitted. This is a resume, not an autobiography.

7. You Break the Page Limit Law

Some schools specify a maximum of one page. Some specify a maximum of two pages for the resume. Whatever it is, stick to it. And no, you are not the exception here even if you are dealing with a one-page limit. Almost all applicants have enough information to fill more than the specified space, and they trim it down to the required length. You can too. By submitting a too-long resume, you're telling the adcom one of a few things (or perhaps all): first, that you are cocky and think that your accomplishments are that much more impressive than those of other applicants and therefore deserve more of the adcom's time than other applicants do; that you are lazy; or that you don't care about the resume page limit.

8. You Don't Vary Your Verbs

A resume that uses the same verbs in its job descriptions over and over again is a boring resume. Many people don't think of the resume as a place to showcase your writing abilities, but it is! A good resume doesn't just present important content, but ensures that that content is well-presented. Switch up your verb usage by replacing overused words like "developed" or "led" with similar verbs like "delivered," "reengineered," "implemented," "initiated," "accelerated," and "established."

9. You Deny Your Reader the Details

Impact is illustrated in numbers, and if you delete these details, then your resume will lie flat. Bring your resume to life by including the most important details of [what you accomplished](#), how you impacted others through your accomplishment. These details should provide the meat of your job description and are necessary if you want to go beyond job descriptions to show an above-average track record of high performance.

10. You Lie

If you're reading this thinking, "Duh! Obviously you shouldn't lie in something as important as an MBA resume (or anything else, really)," then pat yourself on the back – your moral scrupulousness should be a model for others. Sadly, resume writers in and out of the MBA arena think that a little exaggeration here and there will go unnoticed and will only improve their resume. This is not the case. Admissions readers take serious

measures to fact-check their candidates' claims. Please be honest in this area and all other areas of the application process. An unearthed falsehood equals an automatic ding. Better to be safe and report a less-than-impressive fact than to be sorry later for embellishing.



Essay Editing Funnel

One of our favorite essay editing techniques here at [Accepted.com](https://www.accepted.com) is the Essay Editing Funnel. You'll want to begin utilizing this technique once you're done writing the first copy of your essay and are ready to push forward towards the final draft finish line. Here's how it works:

1. The Top of the Funnel

This is the widest part of the funnel and it represents the big picture of your essay. To help you get through this first stage of the editing process, answer the following questions:

- **Does your essay answer the essay question?**

This is one of the most important points in this section. You can write an outstanding essay about your virtues as a volunteer veterinarian assistant that voyages out to faraway lands to help clean up after natural disasters, but if the essay question is about MBA goals, and you don't address that at all, then your essay will have failed.

When the adcom readers are done reading your essay, they should have ZERO trouble connecting your answer to their question. This is the first thing you need to check when editing your essay.

- **Does your essay complement the other sections of your application?**

Your essay should NOT restate your resume in paragraph form, rehash the same stories that your recommender chooses, or document basic information like your name, date of birth, and test scores. An essay comprised of this data will come off as boring and unoriginal. But it's not just that. Your essays provide valuable space for you to introduce a new dimension of yourself; if you don't use this space properly, by adding new experiences and additional stories, then the adcom may think that you are one-dimensional and simply have nothing more to say. Or that you are too lazy to say it.

Likewise, if you are submitting multiple essays for a single application, be sure that the material in each essay complements the others. There should be no overlap; you should use each essay as an opportunity to present new and exciting information.

- **Does your essay help [introduce yourself to your reader](#)?**

Similar to the previous point, your essays should help the adcom readers get to know you better. As you read over your essay during this stage of the editing process, be sure you're your essay furthers your cause by highlighting some of your spectacular experiences and qualities – those things that help the adcom figure out who you are.

2. The Middle of the Funnel

As you move down to the middle part of the funnel, you'll start to pay attention to the structure and style of your essay. Ask yourself the following questions to guide you through this narrowing part of the funnel:

- **Does your essay have a clear theme?**

You may be inclined to cram in as much as possible into your essay, making it read like a list of headlines that never go anywhere or like a verbal maze that takes the reader all over the place but to nowhere specific. These are no-no's. Instead, structure your essay so that it has a clear focus – this is your theme. Your core idea. Whether you implicitly or explicitly state your theme in a thesis sentence, you should make sure that by the time your reader is done reviewing your essay, he or she knows what your essay was about and can identify its theme.

- **Did you provide clear examples to support your theme?**

Your readers can identify your theme – check! But were you convincing? Did you support your main idea with specific, clear examples? Or did you simply state your thesis and run off, ditching your theme in the first paragraph, never to be seen again the conclusion?

To properly structure your essay, you'll need to think of examples that will assure your readers that you mean business with your theme. To state that you possess leadership skills, and then provide no proof, doesn't do much for your claim. Choose a theme, introduce it, and then back it up with examples drawn from your real-life experiences.

- **Did you infuse your essay with details?**

This is where the interest factor comes in. You may have a crystal clear theme and lovely supporting examples, but if your writing lacks color and texture, then you may lose your audience. Your goal should be to use language to breathe life into your essay to make it as readable and enjoyable, and thereby memorable, as possible.

3. The Bottom of the Funnel

Here at the narrow end of the funnel you'll examine the writing mechanics of your essay. You're going to need to put your reading glasses on here and pay close attention to the nitty-gritty.

Ask yourself the following:

- **Have you checked the spelling and grammar of your essay?**

While your word processor's spelling/grammar checker is a good place to start this phase of the Essay Editing Funnel, it's far from your stopping point. It'll pick up obvious spelling errors like if you write "hte" instead of "the" or (if you're lucky) catch a grammar mistake like use of "there" instead of "their." But it most certainly will not catch everything.

The best way to check your spelling and grammar is to use your eyes and your ears. Read your essay aloud to catch errors that your spell/grammar checker missed. Why read aloud? Your ears will hear mistakes that your eyes glossed over.

- **Recruit a second set of eyes and ears.**

Two heads are better than one, and four eyes and ears are better than two.

- **Choose the right words.**

One thing a spell/grammar checker won't catch is your choice of words. Make sure you don't use the same word over and over again and that you vary your sentences so that they're not all super short or super long. At the same time, don't use words or stylistic techniques just to impress. Priority #1: clear, succinct communication.

- **Do a style, standardization, and word/character count check.**

Each school will have its own requirements when it comes to standardization. Consult the application instructions and then make sure your essay conforms (this includes formatting details like margin width and indentation points). And make sure your word/character count doesn't exceed the limit!

So there's your Essay Editing Funnel – a tried-and-true editing technique that forces you to start big, dig deeper, and then finely polish each paragraph, sentence, word, and letter of your essays until they shine.



Short Term Goals

Having a clear and compelling short term goal that fits your overall career objectives is the cornerstone of any strong MBA application. Think about your goals as the pitch for a startup idea – that startup being you – and the admissions committee playing the role of the venture capital fund. What makes a good pitch? A story, a problem, an opportunity, passion, and energy. The same idea goes into developing your career goals. In other words, can you develop a compelling proposition that excites the audience and motivates them to invest in you?

While many schools are experimenting with new prompts and formats, the goals question remains at the center of almost every business school application – either directly or indirectly. Nailing your short term goals signals to the admissions committee that you are confident, mature, passionate, ambitious, and well-prepared. These are the characteristics of great leaders and the traits business schools are looking for. Meanwhile, poorly executed or vague, generic short term goals can easily derail a strong profile and offer little reason for the admissions reader to champion your case. Goals are a hot topic for essays and interview questions because they offer invaluable insights into an applicant's business school experience, recruiting path and prospects, and career development after school.

So what are some of the variables in the “short term goal” equation? Generally speaking, there are three: the industry, function / service area, and stage of the organization. Combinations of these three variables cover everything from a vertical move in an existing company or industry to a career change into something completely new to joining or launching a startup and everything in between. Just three little variables can do all that!

But don't let the simplicity fool you! A “weak” response lists one of these conditions along with a very basic reason as justification for the career move. Some particularly bad, but unfortunately common justifications, include:

- It is the next logical step in my career path and is expected for my line of work (rather boring, no?)
- I want to drive change in an exciting industry (let's be honest, for one, what does this even mean, and two, who doesn't?)
- I seek to lead large teams in solving complex problems (leadership development is a key aspect of business school but this can't be the reason behind a \$130K degree!)
- I need to develop business skills to make a transition into a business role (an MBA can be a great way to move towards business facing roles and responsibilities but reeks of generality!)

What you end up with is a short term goal statement that sounds something like this: “My short term goal after business school is to transition into management consulting and drive change in the fast developing tech industry using my skills to lead teams and solve complex problems for my clients.”

Yawn. This uninspiring goals statement has not only been seen over and over by the admissions committee (and us), but it has done very little to make this applicant's case for a top MBA. Many applicants don't have the experience or a process to help them really dig deep and think about their story. If you really want to create short term goals

that work for you, it takes a completely different approach that involves some serious introspection. Here's how to do it.

Your first priority is to have an objective or a cause that rallies the admissions committee to your side. What is the problem out there that you are trying to solve? What are the opportunities that you see? Why does it matter? Your overall objective will lay the foundation for both your short term and long term goals. This is the vision that you must communicate before you focus on the goals. The goals are the execution side of the equation.

The next step is to establish a clear and credible professional career path that allows you to accomplish your objective. Look forward and backwards. What in your past will help you in the pursuit of these goals? Why will future employers hire you? If you lack industry or functional experience, look to characteristics that might be leveraged or valued on this new path. Looking forward, list potential companies and positions and be specific as possible. How does each company and position fit into the objective that you are trying to accomplish? Don't pick just one job at one company, of course – there's a balance to strike here! This becomes the foundation for developing your short and long term goals. Your goals will be centered around getting employed in certain positions at certain companies along with an analysis on how you came to your decision. For short term goals think about what your summer (and / or in-year) internship(s) as well as your job(s) immediately after school will look like.

Lastly, add the drama and the color that hooks the admissions committee. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, passion and emotion are great tools that can be expressed with word selection. Adding urgency or severity to a problem that must be solved is another useful tactic. Even goals that are focused on opportunities can be brightened by images of inspiration and creativity.

To bring it all together, let's refer back to the earlier example of a weak goals response where the applicant is focusing on management consulting in tech as a short term career goal. We can completely transform this goal statement by saying something like this: "Major security hacks at high profile companies have revealed that our most precious information is vulnerable in today's world. By becoming a management consultant focused on technology security at a firm such as X or Y after business school, my goal is to find new ways to help CIOs of Fortune 500 companies develop innovative security measures that provide better detection methods in order to protect our privacy and financial security as consumers."

See what a difference that makes? Not only is it far more interesting to read, but we vastly improved the specificity as well as improved upon the play between management consulting and technology. The goal becomes a purpose that addresses a major problem with a sense of urgency and sets the stage for your long term goals.

With any goals discussion remember that they should be both realistic yet ambitious in order to make a believer out of the admissions committee. Your goals will be evaluated in terms of:

- Are you qualified? In other words, is it feasible that you will be hired for the jobs that you will be pursuing? MBA programs care a lot about their placement rates and reputation with recruiters. When your goals and background don't match up, caution flags fly.

- Are you ambitious? Are you a big enough dreamer that you aren't content living out the rest of your life as a middle manager once you have an MBA? Hungry MBAs looking to really change the world or have an impact respond with real passion and emotion. And don't, for a moment, think heading into consulting or banking isn't ambitious. It can very much be just that!
- Are you a good fit for that specific program? Your career goals will dictate what kind of knowledge and experience will be needed in order for you to be successful. Admissions committees want to make sure that their program's strengths align with your developmental areas and interests to ensure a good fit.

Follow these tips and your goals will practically be selling themselves to the admissions committee. Good luck!

Should You Apply Early Decision?

Around this time each year, with the start of the new admissions season, candidates who are thinking ahead begin to contemplate whether they should apply to some top MBA programs through Early Decision rounds. Columbia Graduate School of Business and Tuck are two business schools that typically offer this option. What are some of the factors you should weigh when assessing whether Early Decision is a good choice for you?

There are some candidates for whom Early Decision is an obvious ideal choice. For example, some candidates are simply enamored with a particular business school and know it is their first choice. If granted admission, they would quickly and happily accept. So, they want to apply through Early Decision in order to know as soon as possible whether they have admission (and if so, they might choose not to apply elsewhere).

Other candidates have a notable weakness or challenge to overcome in their qualifications or profile. Perhaps a candidate is coming from a small, regional company that is less attractive to some top MBA programs. Some candidates have only a marginally acceptable GMAT score and cannot improve it notably. Some candidates had hiccups in their undergraduate records, resulting in a lower-than-desired GPA. Depending on what the challenge is, such candidates should think through how to time their MBA applications excellently in order to maximize the odds that they might override the challenge(s) in their qualifications or profile. An Early Decision pool can often offer a good alternative for such candidates. In applying Early Decision, you are expressing to the given school that you greatly want to attend their program and are willing to give a deposit upon admission. Because of this, admissions committees are sometimes inspired to overlook a weakness in a candidate's qualifications that they might not otherwise overlook.

Indeed, sometimes when a candidate with a notable weakness in their profile approaches us at MBA Admit.com in Round 1 or Round 2 for assistance in preparing their MBA applications, we can see they would have had a better chance of overriding their weakness in an Early Decision round. For those who think ahead, it can pay off marvelously. We have had many candidates who succeeded at top schools like Columbia and Tuck in spite of glaring weaknesses, likely because they applied through Early Decision. In one example, a candidate gained admission to Columbia Business School with a 2.3 GPA in a graduate degree. I believe Early Decision made all of the difference for him and that he would not necessarily have fared as well in the regular decision pool.

Consider another scenario: Once you become aware of the nuances of admission for each of your target schools, you may come to understand that one of your favorite business schools does not favor candidates coming from small start-ups. If you are from a small start-up and you want to attend that business school, you may be better off applying early so that hopefully you will be one of the smaller number of candidates they

admit with this profile. Thus, Early Decision might be ideal for you. If you wait too late, you may find that you are competing for a tiny number of seats that are still left for candidates applying from small companies. In contrast, if you know that a school tends to favor candidates of your profile and you do not have a notable weakness to override, you might have latitude to wait until Round 1 or Round 2.

A third category of applicants who consider Early Decision programs want to gain admission to a good business school early on so that they can feel “safer” in applying to more competitive schools, knowing that they have an admission in hand already. This, of course, raises the question about whether candidates are compelled to withdraw their applications from all other schools once they gain Early Decision admission somewhere. Usually, the Early Decision school has asked you to indicate that you would accept the admission, if granted. But, the reality is that many candidates each year choose to continue with Round 1 admissions at other schools even after they gain an Early Decision admission and they have paid the required thousands of dollars to the Early Decision school upon admission in order to secure their spot. If they ultimately get into another school they like more, they are willing to forfeit the deposit paid to the Early Decision school. Does the Early Decision school mind? Well, at minimum their bank account is happy with the thousands of dollars they gained from the Early Decision interaction.

What should you do as you assess if Early Decision is an option you should be entertaining? Assess your candidacy well to determine how strong you are as an applicant and if you need the advantage Early Decision gives to you. If you have a notable weakness, applying Early Decision to at least one school might be a great strategic move.

MBA Application Essays – Strengths and Weaknesses, Accomplishments and Failures, Open-ended Questions



Fortuna Admissions was asked by the *Economist* to write a multi-part series explaining how to improve your chances of getting into a top MBA program. Our experts from Wharton, INSEAD, Harvard Business School, Chicago Booth, IE Business School, Kellogg, and UC Berkeley Haas have contributed to this series. We have updated the original articles to include points that are relevant for the 2015-2016 admissions cycle.

Previously in this series, we identified five common themes found in essays. In addition to those, some of the most daunting essay questions for candidates to address are topics that force you to be self-reflective and reveal your level of self-awareness. Candidates can sometimes be unduly modest and uncomfortable promoting themselves and discussing their strengths. Others can be worried about revealing their shortcomings, concerned it may impact their admission chances. Your responses and how you choose to frame the answers can be very telling for admissions officers.

Let's examine how to handle both:

1) Addressing strengths and weaknesses, accomplishments and failures. Examples of this type of question include Dartmouth Tuck's "Tell us about your most meaningful leadership experience and what role you played. What did you learn about your own individual **strengths and weaknesses** through this experience?" INSEAD asks candidates "Describe the achievement of which you are most proud and explain why. In addition, describe a situation where you failed. How did these experiences impact your relationships with others? Comment on what you learned."

When asked to describe your strengths or accomplishments, emphasize your best attributes and relate them to what makes you an ideal MBA candidate, thereby circling back to your sales pitch. Pick an accomplishment that shows you have skills that will be useful in your dream career. And don't stop at describing the accomplishment itself; try to weave the challenges that you faced and obstacles you overcame into the story.

Strengths should also be illustrated with examples that compliment your accomplishments - ideally from the last year or two.

When you're asked to discuss weaknesses, don't make the person reading your file snort in disdain by saying that you're, unfortunately, a perfectionist. Or avoid writing that you work too hard. These are transparent attempts to avoid the question by highlighting qualities that you think make you look good. Instead, pick something more original and honest and, if possible, show that you're working to overcome these flaws. Likewise for failures. Be honest and straightforward, but don't dwell on the negative. What's interesting to the school is what you've learned from the experience and whether you're someone who can bounce back from failure - can you swallow some humble pie and emerge from the experience a wiser human being?

Ultimately, the essay package should give the reader a sense that you're a well-rounded person - not just that you live to work. They should make the admissions officers want to learn more about you and invite you for an interview. Prove to them that you're self-aware, honest, and have a clear sense of what a period at business school will mean for both you and the community in which you will become a member.

2) Answering open-ended questions. More recently, business schools have begun asking open-ended, general questions. One good example of this is Harvard's essay, which has changed this year. The new question for HBS applicants for the class of 2018 is the following: "It's the first day of class at HBS. You are in Aldrich Hall meeting your "section." This is the group of 90 classmates who will become your close companions in the first-year MBA classroom. Our signature case method participant-based learning model ensures that you will get to know each other very well. The bonds you collectively create throughout this shared experience will be lasting. Introduce yourself." In addition, Chicago Booth's 2014-2015 application asked candidates: "In a four-slide presentation or an essay of no more than 600 words, broaden our perspective about who you are. Understanding what we currently know about you from the rest of the application, what else would you like us to know?"

Such open-ended questions can be intimidating at first sight. However, the same rules we've discussed in this series apply. Use this essay as an opportunity to reveal greater dimensions to your candidacy, think about what you've done in the past in terms of what it says about you, and how it shapes your values and attitudes about life. You can also think about any specific situations or aspects from your background that have shaped you into the person you are today. There is no rule about how to approach this essay so decide on what content you want to include before you think about how to communicate this. Don't repeat what can be found already in your resume. Think about ways to provide depth around who you are and you might want to provide a few examples that illustrate the key points that you want to communicate. Also, respect the unspoken word limit; you should discuss a central theme (or two) but don't try to cover too much in this one essay and go overboard.

Finally, whether you feel confident or nervous about tackling the essays, remember the value of getting the perspective of others, whether that is a trusted colleague, friend, mentor, or consultant. These are people who can help you work out your story, and how to best present yourself. As the next step of this series, we'll discuss letters of recommendations.

What Not to Include in Essays

There are certainly a lot of things you should include when writing your MBA application essays, but some things you should definitely not include. Here are a few:

False claims of uniqueness

“The semester I spent in France during high school was a unique experience.”

“I want to attend Columbia Business School because of its unique Entrepreneurial Club.” “The opportunity to do hands-on consulting at Ross is unique.”

“My finance background and strong interpersonal skills will allow me to make a unique contribution to Cornell’s Investment Management Club.”

One of [mbaMission](#)’s consultants recently counted five uses of the word “unique” in a single 600-word essay. What is more, not one of the uses actually fulfilled the term’s correct definition: “existing as the only one or as the sole example.” Applicants tend to use the word “unique” as a way of trying to make themselves stand out to the admissions committee. However, because they use the word imprecisely—and often too frequently—it instead has the opposite effect of making the essay lose its distinctiveness and believability. Another danger of using the term too casually is that you risk exposing your lack of research about the school if you claim something is unique to its program when it really is not.

Here are the same four statements written without the generic term “unique.” In each case, the sentence is far more descriptive and therefore much less likely to appear in any other applicant’s essay!

“The semester I spent in France during high school was eye-opening, from the frogs’ legs I was served at dinner to the concept of shopping daily for my food.”

“I want to attend Columbia Business School because its Entrepreneurial Club offers an incredible range of activities and resources that will prepare me to better run my own company.”

“The opportunity to do hands-on consulting at Ross will complement the theoretical background I will gain by taking classes on consulting.”

“My finance background and strong interpersonal skills will allow me to effectively coach and mentor classmates new to finance through Cornell’s Investment Management Club’s mentorship program.”

Platitudes

Many business school candidates unwittingly start their essays with platitudes—obvious or trite remarks that are written as though they were original. For example, when responding to Harvard Business School’s essay question “Tell us about a time when you made a difficult decision,” a candidate might write the following:

“Managers constantly face difficult decisions. Still, everyone hates indecision.”

However, the applicant does not “own” this idea and cannot lay claim to this statement. A simple alternative would be to insert his or her personal experience and viewpoint into the sentence:

“Yet again, I was in the boardroom with Steve, anticipating that he would change his mind on the [mbaMission](#) file.”

By discussing your personal and unique experiences, you take ownership of your story and better engage your reader. Avoiding platitudes and generalities—and ensuring that you are sharing your experience and opinion, rather than one that could belong to anyone else—is a simple but often overlooked step in creating a compelling message.

Too many sentences starting with the word “I”

Although putting yourself at the center of the stories in your MBA application essays is certainly important, a common mistake business school candidates make is beginning too many sentences with the word “I.” As a general rule, you should never have two sentences in a row that begin this way. Consider the following example:

“I worked for three years at ABC Plastics, a small injection molding company. I was responsible for overseeing the overall management of ABC Plastics, from day-to-day operations to strategic planning. I managed 100 people. I worked very long hours, but I learned more than I could have ever imagined.”

Now consider the same statement reworked to avoid using the word “I” at the beginning of subsequent sentences:

“For three years, I worked at ABC Plastics, a small injection molding company. My responsibilities at ABC included overseeing the overall management of the company, from day-to-day operations to strategic planning. Because I supervised more than 100 staff members, my days were long, but the experience taught me more than I could have ever imagined.”

As you can see, the second example reads much better than the first—and none of the sentences in the second example begin with “I.”

The abbreviation “etc.”

As a general rule, “etc.” should never appear in your MBA application essays. Consider the following sentences:

“I helped draft prospectuses, analyze key company data, value companies, etc.”

“I look forward to courses such as ‘Small Business Management,’ ‘Leading Teams,’ ‘Multiparty Negotiations,’ etc.”

In the first sample sentence, “etc.” replaces information that is of interest to the admissions reader and that he or she would use to evaluate the writer. The reader cannot make the leap and understand where the writer’s experiences led. In the second

example, “etc.” trivializes the school’s resources and may even suggest to the admissions committee that

the applicant is just too lazy (or disinterested!) to properly do his or her homework.

We are at a loss to think of one instance in which “etc.” could be used appropriately in a business school application essay. Very simply, ensure that this term does not appear in your essays.

Extreme descriptions

Our philosophy at [mbaMission](#) is that candidates should let the experiences they share in their essays—not their word choices—captivate the admissions committees. Sometimes we find that applicants attempt to emphasize their actions with “extreme” adjectives and adverbs, and we strongly discourage this approach. Consider the following example:

“As others withdrew their support, I remained remarkably dedicated to our crucial fundraising efforts. I dramatically increased my participation in our strategic planning meetings and insisted

that we push forward with a wildly creative guerrilla marketing plan, which brought forth tremendous results—\$1M in ‘instant’ proceeds.”

In these two sentences, the writer uses the descriptors remarkably, dramatically, wildly and tremendous in an attempt to make an impression on the reader. We find that a more effective approach is to eliminate these “extreme” descriptions and let the experiences do the “talking.”

“As others withdrew their support, I remained dedicated to our fundraising efforts. I increased my participation in our strategic planning meetings and insisted that we push forward with a guerrilla marketing plan that brought \$1M in ‘instant’ proceeds.”

In this second example, we do not need to be told that the results were “tremendous,” because the \$1M speaks for itself; we do not need to be told that the marketing campaign was “wildly creative,” because this is implied in the nature of guerrilla marketing. In addition to showing a level of humility on the part of the candidate, this approach is less wordy. Although the eight words saved in the latter example may seem inconsequential, we removed them from only two sentences. If we can remove four words from each and every sentence, we would be able to augment your essay with other compelling ideas.

Arrogance

Business school candidates often fret about striking the right balance between confidence and arrogance in their MBA application essays. For example, you might have difficulty choosing the better choice from between the following two statements:

“At the Stanford GSB, I will take advantage of the newly designed curriculum to...”

“At the Stanford GSB, I would take advantage of the newly designed curriculum to...”

Or between these two statements:

“After completing my MBA at Harvard Business School, I will pursue a career in...”

“After completing my MBA at Harvard Business School, I would aspire to a career in...”

In each set of examples, you are choosing between certainty (“I will”) and diplomacy (“I would”). Considering these options, you might ask yourself whether the first option is too presumptuous or the second option too weak. The answer is that neither of these examples is “right”; each candidate needs to choose an approach that is consistent with his or her personality. However, the key is to maintain consistency—mixing the two styles is distracting to the reader and can seem sloppy.

Repetition

Recently, a prospective business school candidate emailed [mbaMission](#) with the following question: “What is the most basic stylistic error that candidates make when writing their MBA application essays?” Our answer: unnecessary repetition. Although repeating a word within a single sentence or in consecutive sentences does not constitute a grammatical mistake, it can still be grating to a reader’s “ear.”

Consider this example:

“During my time at XYZ Sales, I increased productivity by 31% and increased revenue by 21%. Meanwhile, I increased my client base by an industry-leading 81%, bringing increased prestige to my firm.”

Although this example—which uses the word “increased” four times in just two sentences —may seem like an exaggerated case, it is actually not as rare as you might think. However, the repetition can be easily eliminated and the sentences made increasingly reader friendly with just a few simple changes:

“During my time at XYZ Sales, I increased productivity by 31% and revenue by 21%. Meanwhile, I grew my client base by an industry-leading 81%, thereby enhancing my firm’s prestige.”

The key to eliminating repetition is to first become aware of the potential problem and then gain distance from your work. If you step away from your essay drafts for a day or two and then go back to reread them, you will have the objectivity necessary to catch—and correct —this easily avoidable mistake.

Mentions of rankings

In your essays and interviews, you should thoroughly demonstrate your interest in your target program by developing and presenting arguments that center on the school’s academic and environmental attributes (e.g., research institutes, professors, experiential learning opportunities, classes, pedagogies)—but do not identify the school’s position in the various MBA rankings as a reason for applying. Although applicants, administrators, students and alumni all pay tremendous attention to rankings, within your application, the topic is entirely taboo.

Why is this? Rankings are a measure of a school's reputation and tend to fluctuate from year to year. By citing rankings, you indicate that you could (or would) be dissatisfied by a drop in your target school's prestige, as conveyed by such rankings—a drop that would be out of the school's control and that, from the school's perspective, could ostensibly put your relationship as a future student (and later as an alumnus/alumna) at risk. Further, MBA programs want to be sure that you are attracted to their various academic offerings and that you have profound professional needs that they can satisfy. Rankings, however, are superficial, and referencing them in your application materials undermines the profundity of your research and motives.

Preparing Short Answer Questions

With the recent release of the 2014 HBS application, it is clear that shortening the number of essays is a trend that is here to stay for now. With only one essay on the HBS application this year, it is becoming more important than ever to not only communicate effectively and concisely, but also to leverage the balance of the application (and of course the interview) to stand out from the crowd.

One result of the decreasing essay trend is an expansion of in-application short answer questions. Just a few years ago, there were few or none of these questions, but schools have since moved several opportunities to share your story out of the essay section and into the application itself. So just how do you go about preparing to answer these short questions? The preparation is remarkably similar to how you approached the essays in the past.

Sounds simple, but you must always be thinking of how you look compared to someone else with the exact same background, cultural experience and involvement because trust us, they are out there. Everyone thinks of themselves as unique, but when you are placed into a pile with other similar folks, you suddenly are not so unique anymore! The challenge comes when you are limited to just a few sentences (or even characters in some cases) to get your point across. There's no room for dramatic storytelling or elaborate embellishment, but you still need to explain why something mattered to you or how it has shaped you.

One thing we generally recommend is to use a matrix to ensure you are communicating a balance of core essentials to the admissions committees. If you use this approach, you will be much more organized as you apply and will also be able to quickly ascertain where you may be coming up short. How does it work? We view the four core essentials of a perfect application are: Leadership, Innovation, Maturity, and Teamwork. These are the four critical areas that all business schools desire to see in their applicants.

Make a grid on a piece of paper with these four attributes across the top columns. Now on the left side of the grid, list the areas down the rows that are covered by the short answer questions (by the way, this also works with the long essay topics). For example, if there is a question in your application about your short and long term goals, write "short term goals" and "long term goals" in separate rows. Make sure you skip some rows between each topic to give you space to fill in information about yourself.

Now comes the easy part. Simply revisit your experience in your mind, and jot down what you see as relevant or compelling information about each topic. Don't worry about whether or not you get everything exactly right, just stream your thoughts. Once you have the rows filled in, go across the grid and check off boxes which you think are adequately demonstrated by that piece of information. For example, if your short term goal is to work in investment banking, and your background is analyst work in an investment bank, you can check off the "maturity" box as well as likely the "teamwork" box, since you probably worked in a team environment and your post MBA goal selection demonstrates a mature plan (because it builds upon something you did in the past). If you feel something is detrimental to a particular area, or does not demonstrate leadership, innovation, teamwork or maturity, give yourself an X in that box.

Of course by the end of the exercise, you will have a scorecard from which you can see where you are strong and where you are weak regarding these four critical areas. If you don't have any checks in the leadership column, for example, you should dig deeper into your experience to try and draw out examples of such. Feeling like your information communicates immaturity in some way? Try to tighten up your goals and plans or think of a situation you've had to handle which required wisdom. Thinking your job was a bit independent of working with others? Draw out examples of how you work in teams in your extracurricular activities.

Once you have your refined grid in hand, you should now be able to selectively draw the key components from your basket of experience to answer your short questions in a way that presents the right amount of balanced evidence. The key word is balance. Business schools like to admit candidates with the "total package," that is, they possess a broad offering of skills and experience which illustrate all four key attributes of the perfect applicant. It's not enough to be the best darn leader your company has ever seen. If you can't work well in teams, schools will pass on you. Are you mature with great strengths in teamwork, but lack the creative spark of innovation? Schools may pass.

Sometimes, this exercise will expose an area where you need to go out and bolster your experience further. That's why it's good to do this early in the application process. Ultimately, the information you offer in the short answer questions is just as vital as the info in your essays. Don't be fooled into thinking these are throwaway questions. The ability to concisely and completely answer a question with a very limited word restriction is an exercise in restraint and economy that demonstrates a very valuable skill in itself to the admissions committees. Don't blow your chance to impress them!

Short-term goals: Make them work for you

As an admissions consultant, I was once working with an MBA applicant in Dubai who asked me, “What should I say for my short-term goals?” Of course, I always follow with, “Well, what do you want to do?” After a brief discussion (much of which is captured in this article), he wrote down two words on his notepad: “BE HONEST!” I laughed, hoping that this wasn’t such a bold, new piece of advice that he’d need to write it down to remember. Really, just those two words are sufficient advice to succeed on your business school applications, but I’ll elaborate a bit further here.

Defining short-term goals. Just so that we’re all on the same page, when an MBA program asks about your short-term goals, they’re asking what you plan to do immediately upon graduation.

Do your research. First, do you understand and can you articulate directly what you want to do? If not, this is a great time to stop and get introspective. Top business schools will typically hold recruiters at bay for a few weeks while first-year students get acclimated to academic life, but this doesn’t last long. Sometimes just a month into your program, you’ll be bombarded with company presentations, coffee chats, networking sessions, and soon, summer internship interviews. Four to six weeks doesn’t provide you much time to determine your path for the rest of your life. Thus, the admissions committee expects that you will have already researched potential career paths for your post-MBA career before you apply. They expect that you will have spoken to people in your target industry and role so you know if such a career switch is possible.

Be unambiguous. The admissions committee is looking for you to state with clarity and conviction your ideal choice of function and/or industry. If you seem vague or wavering, it may be a red flag that you don’t know why you want an MBA. You have no idea how many times I’ve read something along the lines of, “I want to leverage my analytical skills and interpersonal abilities in a Fortune 500 company that values ingenuity, teamwork, and ambition.” All this means is that you have no idea what you want to do, and the admissions committee will deny you. Even if you don’t have exactly one path that you know you’ll certainly pursue after business school, you should be able to articulate at least one well-researched path in your application.

Be realistic. Admissions officers will evaluate whether your goal is realistic based on your prior experience and background. Sometimes they will even consult with the school’s career management team if they believe a career path is questionable. Career switching is very common among MBAs, but if you are interested in a highly quantitative role, for example, it would be expected that you have demonstrated ability through test scores, coursework, or prior experience. Conversely, if you write that you want to move into social impact investing, you should show a track record of community engagement. Note: It seems that nearly every Millennial coming from the finance industry wishes to go into impact investing, microfinance, or social enterprise. (And we get it; who wouldn’t want to make gobs of money while saving the world!) However, they may not realize that there are very few opportunities in this field. It’s okay to be ambitious, but if your Plan A is a bit of a stretch, you might mention your Plan B as well. As long as you can clearly show how you plan to pursue these paths, there’s nothing wrong with providing a well-articulated plan of action on two fronts.

Don't dream up unique goals to try to stand out. (It won't work.) It's true that the admissions committee may often use applicants' short-term goals to shape their class and ensure a diverse set of interests that generally align with their recruiter pipeline. Admissions officers want to see that your interests align with a foreseeable recruiting opportunity for you, and expect that not every student wants to be a consultant or brand manager. However, this does not mean that you should try to "stand out" from the crowd by expressing a short-term goal about starting an NGO in Africa, when you've shown absolutely no interest in international business, economic development, or the nonprofit sector. This will only ring hollow. It's far more important to be honest and realistic than to be unique in your short-term goals. There's plenty of space available at every top MBA program for aspiring management consultants and investment bankers. Even if your short-term goals seem pretty bland, you can always show your grand ambitions with your long-term goals, and then show how your immediate, post-MBA plans will lead you toward your ultimate ambitions.

To wrap things up succinctly, there are really two things that you need to do: 1) Conduct research to understand the kind of opportunities that would be available to you post-MBA, and 2) articulate those goals honestly and clearly to the admission committee so they can see that you have a good chance of achieving them. That's it!

If you have questions about whether your career goals are realistic, or have other concerns about your profile, we'd encourage you to reach out to Veritas Prep anytime and we'll be happy to offer a free profile evaluation!

“Are we there yet???”

You started this application journey months and months ago – maybe it's even been years. You took the GMAT. You wrote your essays. You revised your resume. You got your recommenders. Is the darn thing done yet?

Nope. Not yet. This is one of the most important steps in the entire process. If you skip this step, you might be completely jeopardizing your chances of getting in – no matter how great the essays are, how glowing the recs, how high the GMAT.

The part that you cannot take shortcuts on is the Final Application Review.

It's more than proofreading.

You surely appreciate the importance of proofreading your essays. Let us reinforce the importance of this:

The worst feeling in the world is discovering an error in an application that's already been submitted.

OK no, we take that back: The worst feeling is being rejected from bschool.

The worst worst feeling is being rejected from a school whose app you had discovered a typo in, after it was submitted.

This final phase stuff is important. We need to emphasize that it's really important.

You know that you can't just run spellcheck and call it a day – you need to be careful of those sneaky mistakes like typos that aren't typos because they're real words – like writing “project manger” which we see so often that it's not funny.

[Here's an article on some common word errors that spellcheck won't catch.](#)

Remember that if you have words in ALL CAPS, such as the name of your company on your resume, spellcheck often will simply skip them. It's a feature in MS Word; you may want to disable it during this critical phase of your applications. We frequently notice typos in headers of resumes because of this setting (the most embarrassing is when an applicant misspelled his own name!).

Another problem is that your brain overcompensates. You're reading that same essay for the umpteenth time... You know what it's supposed to say. You don't notice that it's not actually saying it. It's all too easy for your mind to insert words onto the page that aren't actually there. Articles and prepositions are the most common culprits; they're often missing in a draft and never noticed. These can be hard for your brain to spot since you've been staring at the screen, reading the same words over and over, for days on end. But your adcom reader is likely to latch onto any instance of a missing word like an eagle onto a small varmint running across a field. You may not get rejected over such an error but it's not going to do you any favors in the bschool admissions game.

TIP: Do your proofreading in hardcopy. A good way to jolt the brain into paying closer attention the actual words on the page is to read them on the page. Don't just go over the same thing on your computer. Print it out and hold it in your hands. You might even try reading it out loud, word by word – better yet, do that standing up. You'll have to engage with the matter with fresh eyes. You may be surprised at how many errors you spot this way!

Give yourself time.

The best gift you can give yourself at the end of all the hard work you've put in on your applications is to get finished with all the pieces early enough that you have time to relax for this final process. You don't want to rush through your proofreading stage. It's requires extra attention and you will be cheating yourself if you try to cram it in after the end of a long essay development session.

Instead, carve out time in the week before your application is due to sit down with everything in sequence, when you're not feeling harried and exhausted.

TIP: Set aside time for final proofreads – separately. Do your essays in one session. Do your resume separately. Do the application dataset last. Don't do all of them back to back. Proofreading requires careful concentration, and you can easily burn out and start to cut corners mentally without even realizing it.

If you find yourself running up against the wall of the deadline, then at minimum, put everything aside and come back to it one last time in the morning. Don't submit an application if you haven't had the chance to do a fine-toothed comb review.

Cross-check and verify.

A proofreading step that people often skip is the data verification process. You've entered your information into the school's online application, and your resume also has captured it. Do those datasets match? Very frequently, we see people reporting one set of dates on their resume, with a different set on the application. This is bad news when it comes time for a background check. Again, this is an error that might not get you rejected from bschool, but it could raise uncomfortable questions at a critical juncture. Or, if the adcom reader notices it, they will simply assume that you lack attention to detail, and/or you don't really care about their program and didn't put in the time and effort.

Everything in your application needs to be PERFECT. You have no margin of error in this process. The way to draw attention to yourself is through unforced errors like typos and inconsistencies – and that's the type of attention you most definitely do not.

TIP: Don't just read for spelling errors. Cross-reference your dataset against itself. Make sure that you're presenting a single, cohesive view of yourself, and that there are no contradictions or conflicts in what you've reported.

Avoid the worst error of all.

We're saving this one for last – this is a mistake that, as ridiculous as it sounds, happens all the time.

Make sure that the name of the school in your essay is the school you intended to name.

If you took the shortcut of doing a Save-As to reuse an essay from one school to another, you'd better be certain that you excised all references of the original school name in the entirety of the document.

You have no idea how often the Stanford people read an essay saying “I want to go to Harvard because...” – or more often, “MIT”, based on the similarities of some of those two schools' essay questions.

Or Wharton → Columbia. And vice versa.

Be super careful, if you didn't write this essay for this school from scratch, that it's got all the instances of the other school's name replaced.

Can you imagine how irritating that must be to the adcoms?

TIP: Hopefully you didn't re-use essays. But if you did, don't be careless about it.

It's very tempting, once you get to the end of the road, to upload all your files and finally click that Submit button. This is a crucial time! Don't rush things. Take care, and make it shine.

That way – we hope! – when your adcom reader picks up your application, all she will do is smile



Best and Worst Recommenders

Many people forget how important the letter of recommendation is. You should often start 4-8 weeks in advance to ask recommenders and often times you've been working on building your reputation with them for years!. The best recommenders are going to be those that will first and foremost give you a glowing recommendation. So if you are having a difficult time deciding, just make sure that you chose someone that will at least take the time necessary to toot-your-horn a bit. You want them to tell the Adcoms that you are the best they've ever seen, that the school would be silly to turn you down.

Assuming that you have many options, all of which will give you that raving review, how do you decide? Here is how to rank recommenders from Best to Worst.

BEST:

1. Current Supervisor or Boss

It's always going to be the best choice to choose a person that knows your work product inside and out. So if you can swing it with your supervisor, then this is the best route to go. Just make sure that asking your boss won't jeopardize your job.

2. Your Bosses Boss

If you can't get your direct supervisor or think your Bosses Boss will be better, there is no reason not to give them a shot. They will obviously be familiar with your work product!

3. Previous Boss

As you can see, having a supervisor vouch for you is really great in the recommendation process. If you are worried about asking your current bosses, then it might be time to reach out to an old boss for that letter. This is why it is so important to keep strong relationships even after leaving your previous job.

4. President or Supervisor over you in an Extracurricular (EC) role

Extracurriculars can pay off by not only getting you that great experience, leadership, or bonus points on your application, but they can also pay big dividends on the recommendations. If you have strong EC work, then that recommendation becomes that much stronger. Make sure that the person you ask is more of a superior than a peer.

MEDIOCRE:

1. Previous Teacher

If you are a younger applicant without much work experience (less than 2-3 years) then a you may not have strong enough connections or appropriate persons to ask. It might benefit you to think back to that teacher that really had an impact on you in college. If you were able to build a strong enough relationship, they might be willing to give you

that raving review. They will not be as good as a current employer b/c they will not be familiar with your work product as much as a supervisor

2. Pier

Often times people look to their piers for recommendations. This would include anyone that is close to your same level at your current or previous job and has never been your direct supervisor. The recommendation do not hold as much weight as a supervisor b/c often times an Adcom would just assume that you chose a friend. So this would not be the ideal candidate for a recommendation, but they would still be able to give a strong opinion about your work experience

WORST:

1. Mom, Dad, or any family member

There is absolutely no time, reason, or way that you should chose your mom or dad for a recommendation. Even in cases where your mom or dad is your boss, or you work with the family business, there is NO time when mom or dad should be writing you a rec. letter. Their opinion of you will hold no weight in the Adcoms eyes b/c you mom or dad can not be unbiased in your opinion.

2. Someone you don't know that well

So you know someone that will give you a rec. letter if you ask. They are that long time family friend, or someone you knew as a child, or someone that would definitely say yes when you asked. He/she is in a great position, so it seems like the perfect fit. NOOO, this isn't a perfect fit. Often times there are recommenders that won't say no, but when it comes right down to it, their opinion will not hold weight b/c you have never worked with them. Don't get sucked into the "easy" recommendation. It might be easy to ask them, but it won't necessarily pay off those huge dividends.

3. Someone that you don't trust, is too busy, or never on-time

Some people are just flat out too busy to write rec. letters. Don't let someone that is in a rush hurt your chances at Bschoool. If you don't trust their ability to manage their time, get you a rec. letter by the deadline, or you just know it will be the last thing on their plate, don't ask them. It just isn't worth it. I've seen so many individuals hurt by their recommenders, and sweating if they will turn it in on time. The heartache is not worth it!

Conslusion:

The recommender is a key part of your application. Don't look past it, and make sure to START EARLY to get the best people on your side. Become familiar with how your school will ask the recommenders the right questions, and make sure to coach them so that they will paint you as the perfect candidate. Best of luck in your applications, and keep up all

the hard work! It will all pay off

Recommendations in a B School Application

Recommendations are important to your MBA application. In fact, when pressed, some admissions committee members have admitted that recommendations are possibly the most important part. We have below an overview of the recommendations portion of your application. If you are looking for more in-depth information, you can visit the [Stacy Blackman](#) Recommendation Letters Guide and we can also answer questions in this thread.

Recommendations Overview

It often comes as a surprise to candidates that recommendations can be so important to applications. In fact, many applicants just don't take recommendations seriously because they are not the ones to personally complete them.

These applicants fail to see one of the key reasons why recommendations are extremely important. Recommendations can provide a glimpse into your management skills. If you cannot ensure that your letter of recommendation is appropriate, professional and on time, what does that say about your managerial potential?

In addition, a letter of recommendation is the one piece of the puzzle that provides a very important and potentially revealing third party perspective.

Letters of recommendation are an extremely important part of your MBA application process. They must be carefully thought through and professionally managed.

Primary Recommender

Selecting the right people to draft your letters of recommendation is essential. In almost all cases, without exception, you will want to select professional references for at least the first two letters.

When selecting someone to write your letter, choose people with whom you work closely and who know you well. The person's stature is not as important as how well they know you. Don't choose the company CEO with whom you meet monthly, over your manager with whom you work daily. In fact, the single best person to ask for your initial letter of recommendation is the manager to whom you report directly.

Choose people who like you, and who think you're good at what you do. Choose good writers who can express their opinions clearly. If a potential reference seems less than enthusiastic in any way, keep looking. That person's ambivalence is likely to come through in the letter.

Secondary Recommender

If you select two references from the same company, try to make sure that they can provide different perspectives on you, so as not to be repetitive. As an example, one can be your manager, the other can be someone with whom you worked cross functionally. Ask yourself these three questions, among others, when considering potential references:

- Have you worked closely with this person?

- Do you feel this person thinks favorably of you?
- Is this person an advocate for you internally?

Alumni Recommender

We often hear questions regarding the benefit of selecting MBAs to write your letters, or even better, alumna of your target schools. All things being equal, we do believe it is helpful if your recommender has an MBA. However, don't fool yourself into thinking that an alumni letter has great benefit. The truth is that many, many applicants have alums, and often very prominent ones, writing letters on their behalf.

Consider this a "nice to have" but don't select an MBA at the expense of our number one rule: select someone who knows you well.

Academic Recommendations

With academic recommendations, although you may think that your former Economics professor is a great person to write a letter, a professor usually cannot answer questions about interacting with peers, leadership abilities, career goals, areas needing improvement, and more. It's truly essential that the people writing your letters have clear insight into the information that the business schools seek.

Extra-Curricular Recommendations

Should you choose to go outside of the workplace for a recommender, the next best option is often someone from an extra-curricular involvement, such as a volunteer commitment. Leadership is an excellent attribute that is often exhibited to a greater degree outside of work. If you have solid letters from your boss and one other person that you work with or have worked with in the past, you may opt to make a third letter from this type of non-corporate environment. This is generally accepted and can work very well for your application.

Asking Recommenders

Once you have selected your recommender, you will want to broach the subject with the individual in a way that sets you up for success. Ask for their feedback or advice on the topic of business school. Get a feel for whether the person is supportive of business school in general. You may want to begin these discussions quite a bit in advance, so that there are no surprises.

If you are not comfortable with the meeting when you talk to your recommender in detail, remember that you can always choose a different recommender. This is an important part of your MBA application and you want to make sure you have a recommender that is both supportive and able to add meaningful information to your application.

Once you have spoken to these individuals, the next step will be preparing your recommendations. No applicant should just send recommenders off to do their job. You will always want to prepare them and make their job as easy as possible.

Preparing Your Recommenders

Preparation needs to happen. The worst thing that you can do is slave over your applications and then leave the recommendation piece to chance. In preparing your recommenders, you will have two primary goals:

- Share with them the details of your application strategy
- Jog their memory with regards to your accomplishments and actions

Supply your recommenders with information so they are likely to write about the content that you want to go into the letter and so that it is relatively easy for them to write one or many very strong letters on your behalf.



Once upon a time, the [Admissionado](#) founders met countless admissions committee members from schools in the US and Europe at different recruiting events and conferences. One particularly surprising insight was shared repeatedly. Many adcom members (especially those in Europe) revealed they would NEVER admit someone who didn't visit the campus.

Whoa.

"What if they can't afford it?" we always asked. Their standard reply time and time again: business school is expensive and if they can afford b-school, they can afford a visit. A visit was hard evidence this person really wanted to attend, and that they took the time to really get to KNOW the school.

The bottom line, obviously, is that schools visits are important. The value you get from them is unquantifiable. We won't say "visiting will get you in" -- you can't strike out on the application and expect a visit to save you - but it's a good and important step in this whole process nonetheless.

Stepping foot on campus (vs. just reading about it on the interwebs) will make you confident about your choices, knowledgeable about the school, and will expand your network. Plus, it's just... fun. I mean, gosh, go hang out on a college campus for a day or two? Yes please!

And let's be honest - if you're gonna drop \$200K on a school and spend 2 years there...

you should check out the goods first, right? Get a little consultation? Who spends that kind of money on something they've never seen?

So, yeah, you should make some time to pop on over to the schools on your shortlist. But before you do, make sure you know how to make the most of that trip:

Dress sharply and professionally. This isn't undergrad, folks, so leave the sweats at home. And even if you'd wear jeans to class as a student, don't do so as a guest. The aim is to impress, after all, so business casual is appropriate.

RESEARCH. Don't fall for the tempting idea that you'll "learn stuff when you get there." Find out all you can about this school BEFORE you go, and show up familiar with the program. Additionally, go with some goals - maybe to see a specific professor in action, to see how a club works, or to chat with students from your country/desired industry.

Before you visit, think about how you would answer the "Why I want to go to school X" question. And when you're there, taking in the scenery, take notes on anything (personal OR professional) that might be of use in your essays. This will absolutely come in handy later. You can work your findings into your essays to prove to the school that you've done your research and that you're serious about attending, and you can "name drop" people that you met and professors you listened to.

Take notes. Write down the name of EVERY person (student, alumni, faculty, administrator) you meet, what you talked about, and anything else about them (age, profession, country of origin, etc.) After a visit or two, all those faces and buildings

and programs are going to blend together, and the last thing you want to do is profess your love for Darden's cluster program....in a letter to MIT.

Uh, have FUN? This isn't a work trip, folks. At least not ALL work. It's about figuring out where you want to spend the next 1-2 years. So live it up. And soak it up. All of it - the people, the community, the program, the atmosphere, the "scene." Get out there, try the school on and see how it fits.

And when you leave, a clearer picture in your mind, **send a thank-you note to anyone you met with from the admissions office** (no need to thank professors...unless you want to) This is a classy move (wahoo!)... if you do it right. So make it brief. Don't overdo it or attempt to sell yourself. This isn't an application, after all. Just thank them for their time and sign off.

Then head home and start [working on those essays](#)



Guide to Interviewing

Interviews are mostly about fit. That is to say, they are not about assessing whether or not your goal to be in banking makes sense for you. They aren't looking to see whether or not your quant skills are up to par for your intended job. They are assessing, in effect, three things: 1) Do you have a well thought out idea of what you want to do and why? 2) Do you know why you want to come to school X? 3) Are you a normal personable individual who could "carry" the school's name?

Second, most school interviews are blind. That is, at most, the individual interviewing you will have a copy of your resume. They may or may not have read it. Be prepared for the question "So tell me about yourself"...

With that in mind, there are a few key things you must know, and you must know COLD.

1. What are your short and long term goals and why?

Important here is to sound interested and excited. Focus less on the details of what and more on the why. The interviewer is going to be more interested in hearing about why you want to be a banker than what a banker does day to day. Think introspection, think self-aware, think passionate. Explain more than you think you should - remember the interviewer does not know you worked at company X for 3 years in role Y and role Z, and you loved role Z but not role Y. Tell them. Remember, they are not mind readers. The more cohesive, clear and passionate your story is, the better. Super bonus points if you can also describe why you need an MBA now in your career, rather than say, in a year or two. The easiest way to do this is to find something that is going on now in your target industry, and then just talk about how you want to be a part of this change, and to do so, you really need to get your MBA now. For instance, you might talk about you want to deepen turnaround management and finance experience with distressed firms, and that, given the current credit crunch, getting your MBA now is essential to capitalize on the growing opportunities in this area. You can probably come up with something better than that but you get the idea.

2. Why do you want to come here?

You had better have lots of reasons. Avoid website mental dumps. Excellent faculty and diverse student body are weak and meaningless points. Talk about your experiences visiting the school. If you haven't visited, talk about what you've heard, but don't spend time explaining why you haven't been unless asked. If you are asked, just keep it short and sweet. Talk about specific clubs, activities or features of the school that are truly unique. Try to avoid clichés. Kellogg is not all about teamwork and friendliness. Chicago is not all about finance and quant. Stanford is not all about entrepreneurship and VC. Comments of the sort are weak and often make you appear poorly prepared. Rather, talk about what you truly believe - if there's a professor you love, mention him or her by name. If there's a class you are dying to take, mention it. If you can't wait to take part in some activity - say a random walk at Chicago or a round of golf with friends near Darden - then just say it. Better to sound honest and interested than contrived and pandering. The best answers are ones that sound true, contain very specific details and ideas that go beyond merely the website (thus demonstrating a deep understanding) and tie directly into question 1. For instance, replying "I also hope to do a quarter abroad in Australia at School Y, which provides me with exposure to the cultures of my primary target market,

when I launch my shark shaped surfboard, which I know I can here at school Y through your program X which I heard about from XYZ. " demonstrates interest, research and dedication to your goals.

Questions you should consider preparing for are at the end of this post. At the very least, practice the first 15. Yes, they overlap a lot. Get used to a question coming from you in different directions.

Advice for the interview itself. First, whenever you hear a question, restate it in your own words. You want to be sure you've understood. Spending 5 minutes answering something you thought was asked but wasn't, wastes an awful lot of precious air time. Second, get accustomed to and be OK with silence. Don't be afraid to collect your thoughts for a moment before answering. Remember, what feels like 30 seconds of dead air was probably 3.

Finally, and this is the most important - practice this a million times if you can... Transition. Transition. Transition. You cannot prepare for every single question they might ask you - there's just no way. Instead, prepare different answers for questions that you are likely to get, and practice RECASTING the question you receive into one you have thought about. Come up with a handful of stories you can tell, and practice redefining a question so that the story fits. This doesn't mean that if they ask you for a story on leadership you talk about your stamp collecting hobby. There has to be a link - but the more you practice it, the better you will get at it. For instance, if they asked you something like "Tell me about what drives you" - you might reply "You know, that's a good question. I'm motivated by a lot of things, obviously, or else I wouldn't be here today, but I think the thing that motivates me most is seeing those around me succeed. I get a lot of joy from that. For example.... BIG TEAMWORK STORY". Suddenly, instead of coming up with something entirely new right there on the spot, you've taken an existing teamwork story and recast it to fit the question.

So, what stories do you need?

You absolutely need: leadership, teamwork, biggest weakness (that you continue to address), cultural story, outside of work story, analytic ability story, ethics story. Come up with your best leadership story and your best teamwork story...

This brings me to my next tip. You will have a pad of paper with you in all likelihood. Have cues on the pad.

For instance, I might write:

"L: X story. Antici prob w/ ABC, picked 2 prs, exec ask me to lead, did X, did Y,.... "

The idea would be that I could glance down at the page, and if I'm drawing a blank, I could quickly remember what my leadership story was... "Oh yea, its the X story, the one where I anticipated that problem with ABC, picked those 2 people the execs had asked me to lead ..."

Odds are you wont have to look at the page, and if you are prepared, you won't have to. But... better to have it, and take 2 or 5 seconds to glance at it than to just start talking when you cant remember your points.

So, I had a one line description at the top of my pad of paper for Leadership, teamwork, analytic, ethical, cultural etc...I also had a few titbits on why school X. For instance, for

Kellogg I had "WHY K: GIM, JV, balanced approach"... This was to remind me to talk about the GIM programme, the Joint Ventures programme, etc. Its easy to forget these details, and having one or two word reminders is helpful.

Of course, don't rely on the pad unless you have to. Its best to know your stories cold. Don't be afraid to write down questions you have for the interviewer either.

Finally, a good way to practice if you have a long commute.... tape the questions into mp3 format, burn them on a CD and slap them in your car stereo on the way to work. Practice answering them on your way there and back and you'll do well. If you really really want to test yourself, record your own answers, and listen to yourself. Its painful, but can help.

Consider timing yourself as well. A ten minute answer to "Tell me about yourself" is too long.

Some general practice questions:

1. Discuss your career progression
2. Give examples of how you have demonstrated leadership inside and outside the work environment
3. What do you want to do (in regard to business function, industry, location)?
4. Why the MBA? Why now?
5. Describe an ethical dilemma faced at work?
6. Describe your career aspirations
7. What would you do if not accepted?
8. What are your long- and short-term goals? Why?
9. Why are you applying to business school?
10. Why does this school appeal to you?
11. What is an activity you are involved in? Why is it important to you?
12. Talk about experiences you have had at work.
13. Why are you interested in a general MBA program?
14. Why did you choose your undergraduate major?
15. Discuss yourself.
16. Name three words or phrases to describe yourself to others
17. What is most frustrating at work?
18. How would co-workers describe you

19. Describe a typical work day
20. Have you worked in a team environment? What were your contributions to the effort?
21. Discuss any experience you have had abroad.
22. How did you choose your job after college
23. What do you do to relieve stress
24. It's two years after graduation, what three words would your team members use to describe you
25. Describe a situation where you brought an idea forward, and it failed.
26. How do you define success?
27. What would you do if a team member wasn't pulling his own weight?
28. Is there anything you would like to ask me/us
29. Give an example of leadership that you didn't discuss in your essays
30. What is your leadership style?
31. What are the pros/cons of your style?
32. What did you learn from experience XYZ (that was discussed in my essays)
33. Tell me about a time you had to deal with conflict in the workplace
34. Tell me what you do in your daily job
35. How are you a leader in your job
36. Have you thought of other schools?
37. What accomplishment are you most proud of?
38. What role do you usually take in a team setting?
39. Tell me about a time when you exhibited leadership.
40. How do you work in teams?
41. What would your colleagues miss least about you?
42. What makes you unique?
43. Tell me about a standout academic experience.
44. Tell me an important thing that you learned from your work and school experiences.

45. Tell me about a specific situation in your professional career where you solved an important problem.
46. Why do you want to be in senior executive role?
47. When was your belief challenged
48. What books do you read
49. When did you lead a team? What is the hardest part of leading a team
50. Would you have any regrets if the market tanked next year and you were unable to get a premier job
51. Where else have you applied and what was the result
52. What do you/don't you like regarding your job
53. Second largest, third largest failure

Interviewing Strategy

When the time comes for you to interview with your target MBA program(s), you may inevitably find yourself fretting and wondering, “What if I don’t know the answers to my interviewer’s questions?” The good news is that a business school interview bears no resemblance to a TV quiz show. The admissions officer, alumnus/alumna or student who interviews you will not ask you about esoteric topics and will not expect you to answer questions pertaining to management disciplines. The vast majority of the questions you will encounter in your interview will pertain to your life and experiences—in other words, the interviewer will be asking you about you—so you will already have all the answers in hand from the beginning.

As your first step in preparing for your interviews, take time to reacquaint yourself with your own story, especially as you have presented it to the school thus far in your application. Go back and reread your essays, contemplate pivotal moments in your life and consider your major accomplishments and failures. By doing so, you will be sure to have this basic knowledge fresh in your mind so you can perform at your very best during your interview.

While most business school interviews are straightforward opportunities for an admissions representative to learn more about a candidate’s personal and professional background, goals, reasons for selecting a specific school and leadership/team experiences, interviews can vary dramatically from school to school and sometimes include a few peculiarities. So, what constitutes a “tough” interview, and how can you best navigate one?

Stoic interviewer: Some interviewers can be unemotional, refusing to give the candidate any indication as to whether he/she is making a positive impression or not. Of course, when an applicant is under intense pressure, this perceived lack of approval can be misunderstood as a sign of disapproval. The key in managing such an interview is to tune out the interviewer’s lack of emotion. Focus on your answers and do your best to not be distracted by anything about the interviewer, tuning out everything except the questions he/she is posing. “Reading” the interviewer in real time can be challenging—concentrate instead on showcasing your strengths.

Philosophical questions: Most candidates expect to discuss their experiences and accomplishments in their admissions interview, but not their values and philosophy on life. Harvard Business School in particular likes to understand applicants’ motivations and will ask questions like “What is your motivation to succeed?,” “What drives you?” and “What gives you purpose in life?” The key to answering these sorts of questions is pretty simple: expect and prepare for them in advance (after all, you are being warned right now). Do not assume that all the questions you will receive during your interview will be experiential.

Persistent questioning: Sometimes a tough interviewer will continuously delve deeper into a subject, such as by repeatedly asking, “Can you be more specific?” or “Can you tell me more about that?” These kinds of pressure tactics can be disconcerting, but the key is to simply stay on topic. No matter how persistent he/ she is, the interviewer is always essentially asking you about a subject that you know quite well—you! Just stick to your agenda, and you will be fine.

What about scheduling interviews? Many schools will give applicants a significant window in which to schedule their interview, so you may wonder whether the date you choose will send some kind of message to the admissions committee. Does scheduling an interview early convey that you are too aggressive and do not have any other irons in the fire, or that you are eager to act and impress the admissions committee? Does scheduling an interview later give the impression that you are less interested in the program, or that you are very serious about your applications and are taking your time to prepare and inform yourself thoroughly before each step of the process?

The reality is that the timing of the meeting does not matter. Neither scheduling early nor choosing a later date confers any advantage or disadvantage (nor does selecting any day in between). The MBA admissions committees recognize that you, like all candidates, are busy and that your schedule is in flux as a result of work, community and personal commitments. The committees focus on the interviews themselves, not on when they are scheduled. So pick a date that works for you—a day and/or time when you know you can be comfortable and relaxed, not distracted—and start preparing!

What should I wear?

Always follow any guidelines the school provides on proper interview dress. If “business casual” is specified, wear business casual; if “business attire,” dress in business attire. Jeans, T-shirts and ripped or unclean clothing are never appropriate. If the school does not specify a dress code, wear business attire for any on-campus interviews as well as for an off-campus interview with a member of the admissions staff. Business casual is often best when meeting an alumnus/ alumna off campus, though you may consider politely asking the person you are meeting about proper attire in advance. Showing some creativity and style with your clothing is okay, but do not go overboard—remember that your meeting is a professional one, and your first impression is vital.

I am meeting my interviewer at a coffee shop. Who pays?

If you are meeting an alumnus/alumna at a café or similar establishment for an interview, you can avoid the awkward “who pays?” scenario by arriving a few minutes early, purchasing your own beverage and then offering to pay for the interviewer’s selection when he/she arrives. If your interviewer arrives before you, you might politely offer to pay for his/her drink, but if the interviewer declines, you should not insist.

Should I send a thank you note?

Yes, you should always send a brief thank you note after your interview. Write and send the note as soon as possible after your meeting—the same day or the next is ideal—and be sure to mention specifics from your conversation or your visit.

Emailing the thank you is fine. Interviewers usually need to submit their feedback on candidates within 24 hours, so you want your message to be received quickly.

If I am not sure how I did, can I ask for feedback?

No! Feeling anxious about how you performed is natural, but do not ask your interviewer for feedback. Doing so will not establish you as professional and mature and will instead leave the impression that you lack good judgment (not to mention confidence). Just be patient and wait for the admissions committee to make its decision!

As interview decisions begin to be released, do your best to remain calm and let the admissions committees do their work. Becoming a little apprehensive is natural if you have not yet received an interview invitation, but you will certainly not increase your chances of receiving one by calling the admissions office and asking if they have all your files or if an interview decision has been made. In fact, such calls can have a negative effect on your candidacy, inadvertently framing you as pushy or even belligerent.

Admissions offices are increasingly transparent and should be taken at their word. If they say they are still releasing decisions, then they are in fact still doing so. If they say that the timing of your interview decision does not signify an order of preference, then it does not. As painful as it is, unless something has changed materially in your candidacy, all you can really do is wait patiently and try not to think about the decision or second-guess your status.



Waitlist Management

Well it is that time of year again, where admissions, waitlists, and dings start rolling out for most of the top schools. If you were **Admitted** then congratulations to you! If you recieved a **Ding** I hope you got some good news from another school! Now if you were put on the **Waitlist** then this is not the time to give up! There are still some things that you can do to get yourself off that waitlist and into your dream school. You should consider all the following tactics and figure out which direction you should concentrate all your energy. Remember, you only have a short amount of time, so not enough to complete all these task. But even completing 1 or 2 of them might be that extra boost to get your name at the top of the waitlist!

1. Get a promotion at work

I know, I know, easier said than done right!? Well for some of you, you might be RIGHT on the cusp of that promotion. Or who knows, maybe you were promoted while your application was being reviewed and you never thought to update the Adcoms. This is your chance! Anything you can add, might help.

2. Retake the GMAT and score higher

If you believe you left some points on the table when you took the GMAT, this might be the time for you to give it another go. Especially if your Quant abilities might be the concern. If you did not have undergrad quant classes, did not do well, or scored below the 70th percentile on the GMAT, this might be a huge opportunity. I would recommend giving it another go, BUT only if you really know or believe you will raise your score. Practice on a GMATprep test from MBA.com before you go in to make sure you're scoring higher. You don't want to end up hurting your chances for reapplications b/c you will have many months to retake if you want for next year.

3. Enroll in a Statistics, Calculus, or pre-MBA style math course

This might let the adcoms know exactly how committed you are to their university. Maybe even take these classes from your desired school (if available, maybe online). This will show your commitment, and show them that you are overcoming any quant weakness they may think you have.

4. Attend school functions (if you live around there) and get to know the admissions director or team

Now this is a tough one, and hopefully you've already been doing this. But if for some reason you believe "Hey, if they get to know me, there is NO WAY they will say no". Try to attend an open house, or a recruiting event and let them know your position. Tell them how committed you are, and how much you hope that you'll be attending this year. Again, who knows, this could be the boost you are looking for!

5. Take on big leadership type projects or roles at your current job if possible

If you take on, or are finishing up a HUGE project that was not included in your application, this might be time to show them your leadership. Just make sure that this project is noteworthy enough to make them say "wow, that's impressive" and possibly get them to reconsider your position on the waitlist.

Finally

If you are able to complete any of the above, send them an update and continue to show how interested you are. You only get ONE chance at an update, and it should be extremely well crafted, professional, impressive, and with the correct timing. Your goal should be to get your name as HIGH up on that waitlist as possible b/c it might be the difference between getting in and not getting in.

I do not represent any admissions consulting companies, but it would be my opinion that you speak with one of them about your specific situation, and figure out a way to craft this letter and get yourself to the top of the list. This is your last chance, and you should definitely get a professional opinion! Plus, you might be able to get some well deserved feedback as to why you didn't get an admit in the first place.

PS. Only send ONE update. You do not want to be the person bombarding them otherwise they will consider you "that crazy guy" and that will definitely earn you a ding. So make sure to be tactful with your only update. So pick the right time, right info, and right way to update them.

PSS. Contact your school directly if they have not given you a way to give the Adcoms an update. Normally this is done through the internet or letter.

GOOD LUCK TO ALL WAITLISTERS!

Reapplications

Unfortunately, a mere 15% of applicants receive good news from some of the most competitive programs. If you are extremely focused and targeting only a small set of highly ranked programs, you may end up without any options at the end of the process and start to contemplate reapplying the following year. Some schools are more friendly towards reapplicants than others. A reapplication can signal commitment to the MBA or to a particular school. If you are going to reapply, the key to a successful application will be demonstrating that you have learned, evolved, matured and progressed since your prior application. For certain schools, reapplying the following year can be a difficult strategy because there is just not enough time to significantly improve your application. Other schools will see a more focused, mature application, an improved GMAT score or a promotion at work, and that will be the change they need in order to change their minds.

- There are many ways to show that you have advanced. In your career, an obvious example is a promotion. But usually the promotions do not fall into place at exactly the time that we need. So you may have to create change in other ways. You may want to take a look around your office and think about processes or tools that can be improved upon. Then volunteer to be the one who makes the change. Or perhaps you would like to spearhead some morale building activities, recruiting events, or lead community outreach programs. There are many small ways to emerge as a leader in your work environment. It is just up to you to find the opportunities and seize them.

- Outside of work, the world truly is your oyster. If you are currently involved with activities, or hobbies, think about how to grow into more of a leadership role and make an even bigger impact. If you do not have any “extracurricular” involvements, this is a great time to grow that aspect of your application.

- Applicants will generally want to expand their list of schools when they reapply. I generally advise an applicant to reapply to a school that they have their heart set on, but to choose some different choices. If there is a school that they are not terribly excited about or one that is just too competitive, perhaps they can be omitted in favor of new schools that are a better fit.

Addressing Weaknesses/How to Explain a Low GPA and Other Sensitive Issues

Beyond actually fessing up to failures and weaknesses, the essays are a forum to provide an explanation for aspects of your background that require clarifications or of which you are not terribly proud. You will have to decide case by case what warrants an explanation, but you should not ever assume that the admissions committee will glaze over some aspect of your background, or that other strengths will erase a weak spot. If a glaring weakness exists, they will see it. And if an explanation is not provided, they may jump to their own conclusions. As you provide explanations, you should consider why the admissions committee cares about a certain aspect of the application and work to appease their concerns. For example, there are very good reasons why GPA is important. Beyond proving that you can handle rigorous academics, your GPA provides insight into your work ethic, multi-tasking skills, commitment to excellence and your track record of success. Think about how you can address some of these concerns through your story.

Low GPA: We discussed this a bit in our earlier section on candidacy. In addition to taking a class to demonstrate that you can handle a challenging quantitative curriculum, you may want to provide some context for why your grades suffered during undergraduate studies. Here it is important to be very clear on the difference between providing background and making excuses. Explaining that your grades were poor because the curriculum was really difficult is generally not going to fly. The business schools generally consider their curriculum to be challenging as well! However, you may be able to explain that your grades dipped due to some personal challenges, a family emergency, a health crisis or more. This is also where honesty can be most effective. If the reason for low grades is lack of focus or immaturity, own up to it and show how you have changed. Don't dwell on it and move on. Note that one slightly low grade probably does not necessitate an explanation. Use judgment regarding where you dedicate time to explaining a downfall in your application, and do not feel the need to detail reasons for every small hiccup in your background.

TAKING EXTRA TIME TO GRADUATE COLLEGE – There are many reasons why one may have taken extra time to graduate from college. Often, these reasons and explanations can be very interesting reads of your interests and allow the admissions committee to learn more about what you were pursuing at that time in your life. It can certainly be okay to take that extra time, especially if you have a compelling reason for doing so. If you took time off to be a ski bum, or temporarily drop out, this is another time to be honest when you may need to be honest and own up to a lack of focus, then provide evidence of a more recent shift in priorities.

SWITCHING MAJORS – Some applicants want to explain a drastic shift in majors and at times it can make sense to do so. While changing majors is not necessarily a weakness, it can raise questions about your focus, or at the very least, leave the admissions committee curious about the change. An honest depiction of why you decided to change is called for. There may be an interesting event that led to the change or just a gradual shift in interests. College is a time for discovery and learning about oneself. Being honest about your evolution can be an interesting way for an admissions committee to learn more about your interests.

Low GMAT – This is a tough one to “explain”. Since all applicants take the same test under the same circumstances, and you are allowed to retake the test as frequently as you like, it is difficult to come up with a good reason for why you cannot hit that 700. What you can do, however, is leave little question regarding your academic abilities by proving competence elsewhere. Perhaps your undergraduate GPA erases some of the concerns. Perhaps challenging quantitative courses that you have taken more recently will satisfy the admissions committee's concerns. A job that is quantitatively rigorous and recommends that testify to your skills may also appease the committee. The GMAT is just one way to measure competence, and while it is important, if you cannot hit a target score, you can certainly find other ways to demonstrate your skills.

No Outside Activities – A dearth of outside activities can make an individual appear one dimensional and not terribly interesting. Even if you have no obvious candidates for this category, dig deep and really think about how you have spent your time. Many applicants think that they have done nothing worth mentioning but don't realize how interesting an interest in the martial arts, a trip to Uganda or organizing a company soccer league can be. If you truly have nothing to speak of outside of work, you are going to have to work that much harder to reveal your personality through anecdotes from work or

personal interactions. Be very careful about making excuses regarding a lack of volunteer work. Everyone is busy, but somehow, lots of people find the time.

Lots of Career Changes – If you have a high volume of job changes on your resume, you may appear to lack commitment or be unfocused. You will probably need to explain the reason for your changes and help the admissions committee to understand the motivation behind your decisions. It's important in this situation to refrain from merely chronicling your resume. You will want to explain the "WHY?" behind the "WHAT you did". There is no right number of jobs, or right number of years at a job. Most important is to explain why each step is a logical one in your path to the MBA and longer term goals.

Being Fired or Laid Off – A candidate may be outright fired from a job for poor performance. More frequently however, we see applicants who are laid off due to downsizing. This often happens very early on in a job, before the applicant even has a chance to prove his or her self in the position. As with other difficult situations, this is also a time for honesty. If you have made a mistake, this is the time to own up to what happened and take responsibility for a poor decision. You can explain what was learned, and demonstrate how you have bounced back from this failure or setback.

The Optimal Approach to Your Optional Essay

When it comes to the optional essay offered by most schools, a frequent question is - is it really optional? Many applicants feel an obligation to write something, and struggle with what that something should be. Note that there are two different types of optional essays. In one scenario, the school will simply ask you to write about anything that you feel is missing from your application that you would like them to know. This is the more flexible question. In the second scenario, they are looking more specifically for gaps in work experience, issues with your transcript or recommenders. In the second scenario, they are looking for very specific information, and you should answer thoroughly but succinctly if you choose to answer at all.

In both cases, my approach to the optional essay is the following:

- 1) Complete your entire application, except for the optional essay. Don't worry about that piece of the puzzle just yet.
- 2) Once complete, review your application and ask yourself if there is something extra you would like to communicate to the admissions committee.
- 3) If there is something missing, by all means, use the optional essay as an opportunity to say what you need to say!
- 4) If you cannot think of a topic you would like to cover, do not waste the admissions committee's time, (or your time, for that matter).

I have seen a full range of topics for optional essays for the first scenario and frequently feel that the information included could have been incorporated elsewhere. When the optional essay is approached in this way, the applicant will take what could have been three lines of material and expand it into a full essay. This is a waste of everyone's time. Remember that the person reviewing your application has a lot of reading to do - so you want to make every word count. When brainstorming ideas for that optional essay, make sure that you cannot address the material elsewhere in the application. I frequently see the topic, "What I can contribute to your program." This is an example of a topic that really should be addressed all throughout your application, and often fits well into the primary essay about goals and program selection. As a result it feels superfluous and redundant when used for the optional essay.

In the second scenario described above you really need to be careful to follow their directions. The following is general advice and needs to be taken within the context of your overall strategy and the school that you are looking at. However, in GENERAL, the following topics are good material for this type of optional essay:

- 1) Explaining gaps in work experience
- 2) Explaining choice of recommender
- 3) Explaining extenuating circumstances effecting GPA, GMAT or other aspects of your profile. This does not mean that you need to explain why you received a 3.5 one quarter as opposed to your usual 3.8. Extenuating circumstances means that something happened that significantly impacted your application. Perhaps there was a family crisis, or you were experiencing health problems. If your GPA dipped during this time, it would be very important for the admissions committee to know this.

To answer the question we began with: Yes, the optional essay is truly optional. So, exercise restraint!

Business school is an expensive investment, and it's never too early to start figuring out how you will pay for it. An MBA must be seen as a long-term investment, and fortunately, schools are committed to working with students to find a solution to financing school through a combination of loans and scholarships.

As you create your plan to pay for business school, you should contact your prospective school's financial aid office. You can also get advice through admissions events. Financial aid officers are an amazing resource. They've seen it all before, and they want to ensure qualified candidates can pay for a degree.

Starting early – about three months before applying – is also important if you're pursuing scholarships, fellowships or grants. Since scholarships are free money, competition can be fierce, and you'll benefit from having the time to create strong scholarship applications and from knowing the key deadlines so that opportunities don't pass you by.

You may also need to submit a different application for each fellowship or scholarship. Don't lose out because of a missed deadline. Look beyond your business school, too, to organizations like the Forte Foundation or Consortium for Graduate Study in Management that offer highly valuable scholarships for MBA students.

You may be considered for merit fellowships based on your academic credentials, accomplishments and experience that has already been communicated in your application. Some schools may also offer additional fellowships that you can apply for directly through the program.

Applying for the Money

There are many different application processes for financial aid, from demonstrating need to demonstrating merit. Organize the deadlines and submission guidelines to make sure you have a plan to complete the applications, and carefully follow the directions of each scholarship, fellowship or loan you are applying for.

If you are required to submit an essay, answer the question thoroughly and succinctly as you would any other MBA essay. Questions may vary, though this question is representative of the type of question you may receive:

Describe what you see as the value of fellowships/scholarships to students. Why should you receive one? What impact will it have on you and/or your Wharton experience? (500 words)

The value of fellowships/scholarships should be fairly straightforward, though you may emphasize either need or merit in your response, depending upon the direction you plan to take in the argument for your own application.

The need based direction may be difficult to prove without serious financial hardship. If you did have difficulties with finances throughout your life and would not be able to attend business school without such assistance, you may have a good argument. If not, you should pursue the merit-based direction.

Providing evidence for the need-based direction of the argument should be fairly straightforward. Describe your situation and why you would have difficulty paying for your MBA education. Avoid any complaining or blame, and instead focus on what you have been able to accomplish in your life with little resources and how you would be able to continue to accomplish as you benefit from greater resources.

If you are going with a merit-based argument you should outline your accomplishments, both academic and professional. Sell yourself as you would in a job interview, and provide solid evidence for your accomplishments as you did in your application essays.

The impact of financial assistance may allow you to pursue activities such as travel and leadership opportunities. In addition, your receipt of aid may benefit the people around you. If you have been involved in your community or with charity, you can certainly describe the impact you have made on the lives of others thus far and how that impact will be even greater with a business education.

- See more at: <http://www.stacyblackman.com/2015/07/29/paying-for-your-mba-with-fellowships-scholarships/#sthash.tpTbDwMp.dpuf>



Applying in Round 3 (Last Round) CRITICAL SQUARE

Every year, as round 2 application deadlines rear their collective heads, a natural question arises for those of you who started on their applications yet: should I apply round 3 this year or push things back to round 1 next year? This is a pretty personal decision and there are a lot of things to consider.

Let's address the 800lb gorilla in the room first. Applying round 3 (or round 4 or round 5...a handful of programs even have a round 7!) isn't ideal. There aren't a lot of seats left on the bus and you're going toe to toe with a ton of other applicants - from those who are behind on applying to those who didn't see the round 1 or round 2 results they were hoping for to those waitlisted at the very schools you're applying to from the first and second rounds. It's a madhouse when it comes to round 3. If you're international, that's an additional wrinkle because if the school allows global applicants in its later rounds (and many don't), you're playing a rigged game of musical chairs. Not to mention, most scholarship money is allocated at this point. So not only are you fighting tooth and nail for the few spots left, there's also less sweet, sweet moolah to be had.

But, after all that gloom and doom, a lot of people DO apply in the third round and some are successful - wildly so. Why? Well, simply put, for some applicants, round 3 is a perfectly fine strategy! Here are a few types of applicants who can consider applying in the hyper-competitive third round.

[Those With No Choice]

Is there something in your life that makes it imperative you apply this year? By that, we don't mean you WANT to start school in the fall, we mean do you HAVE to start school in the fall. When put that way, most of you probably don't have to do that. But some of you might. Make sure you delineate between "want" and "have". As always, ensure you have the time to put forward amazing round 3 applications. For that matter, will you have similar bandwidth for round 1 deadlines? If you're going to be swamped at work or out of the country during round 1 next year, maybe round 3 makes sense. The opposite is also true. But once again, you should be sensing a common theme here. Applying round 3 is ok if you have absolutely no other choice. That said, your school selection will suffer if you don't also fall into one of the buckets below. If the only thing dictating R3 for you is that you have no other choice, be ready to shift lower in the rankings - maybe significantly so.

[The Unicorns]

Are you a special snowflake? Note, we didn't ask if your parents think you're one. We asked if you ARE one. Do you, in other words, bring diversity to a fairly full class design? Maybe you're from an underrepresented applicant pool or come from a professional walk of life that is super unique. Maybe you're a free spirit that does what they want. Whatever it is - do you bring something to the consideration set that very few people in R1 and R2 would have brought to the table? If so, R3 could very well be an option for you. With close to 80 - 85% of the class filled by the time R3 rolls around and with a significant waitlist of candidates in the wings, admissions committees are looking for something new, something different. Someone who will round out the class and fill in any remaining gaps. So if you're a consultant or a banker - R3 is not for you. It doesn't matter how amazing you think your work experience is - definitely focus on earlier rounds!

[Folks Where Something Significant Changed]

This is perhaps the softest reason on the list but it's worth mentioning. Your life changes – things happen. These events can, all of a sudden, make an MBA the right decision. If that happens to be you, then round 3 may be your only option. Maybe you got a promotion or recently took a cool fellowship for a few months or recently left the military. Whatever it is, something changed and starting school in the fall is right for you. That's ok – you'll just have to explain it clearly in your application. But don't read this and think to yourself, "oh, see, I fit into this bucket" because it isn't that easy. You still have to bring something interesting to the admissions committee to the table – a super high GMAT, a unique story, compelling professional experience – something! And even if all this happens to be the case, the question must be asked – are you SURE you can't wait until R1 the following year?

A lot of times applicants think if R3 doesn't go according to plan, they'll just reapply the next fall. This is terrible logic and you will get labelled a reapplicant which comes with its own challenges. Reapplications are difficult and they're built on change. What has changed in your experience, perspective, or research in only a few months to make you a stronger candidate? If you apply in R3 and get dinged, how much could have possibly changed in five months? Probably not a lot, right? And if your backup strategy was just reapplying in R1 anyway, why not just wait?

While there's no right answer to whether you should applying round 3 this year or postpone your apps until round 1 next year, you should think it through carefully. There are distinct advantages to applying in earlier rounds that could greatly outweigh the perceived benefits of hitting round 3 this year. But, then again, folks get admitted during round 3 at every single MBA program out there!

PS – if you apply in the 3rd round, definitely use the optional essay to discuss WHY you waited until the very end!

When to submit an optional essay

When working in admissions departments at top MBA programs, some of the questions that we were asked each year were whether a candidate should write an optional essay, and what kinds of topics should be addressed in the optional essay space. In the last few years, as many MBA programs have reduced the number of required essays and essay count, the answers to these questions are less clear-cut. Applicants are eager to share unique information about themselves but now there's less space to communicate this kind of information. While in some cases we can easily determine whether or not to write an optional essay, in other cases the answer requires more thought and discussion. Judith Silverman Hodara, former Acting Director of MBA Admissions at Wharton shares her own advice around this topic in our new Fortuna video "Latest trends in MBA Admissions" so [click here](#) to hear her tips. We will also provide some guidance here to help you determine how to approach the optional essay.

It's important to read the information around the optional essay for each school since some schools can treat this application component differently. Do your research and read postings on the schools' online admissions pages and blogs as these can sometimes provide suggestions for how to handle the question. At University of Michigan Ross, for example, after removing application questions from prior years about applicants' goals and reasons for pursuing an MBA, the Admissions Director's blog requests that applicants NOT use the optional essay to write about these topics. Instead, Ross prefers to discuss career goals and reasons for an MBA in an interview where they can ask follow-up questions and get a deeper understanding of each applicant's plans in person.

Wharton's instructions for the optional essay invite applicants to use the optional essay (up to 400 words) to "highlight any additional information that you would like the Admissions Committee to know about your candidacy." Judith warns applicants to not use the optional essay to reiterate content covered in other parts of the application for this section. If, however, there's something that you could not fit into the first essay which you believe is integral to help demonstrate a clearer picture of who you are, this could be the place to include it. It's important that you use good judgment in what you write about and ask yourself if this information is worth another ten minutes of time by the person reading your application.

Topics to include in most optional essays

There are some topics that a school will expect you to address in the optional essay and examples of these are poor grades in college (or in other higher ed programs), low GMAT score, breaks in education or employment, and recommenders who are not your managers. Hopefully you have an explanation for these, especially poor grades, which does not come across as an excuse. You should keep these explanations brief and if there's something that you have done to address these issues, this is the place to include that information. One applicant we worked with had several "C" grades in analytical courses in college but she recently took additional quantitative classes through a continuing education program and received "A" grades to show that she can handle the rigor of coursework in a top MBA program.

"Gray area" topics

Some topics that are not as straightforward and in these cases, we suggest you run your ideas by someone you trust. In some situations, what you consider a weakness might not be an issue and writing about it in an optional essay might draw more attention to something that wasn't even noticed. A few common areas that we get questions about

are college suspensions, trouble with the law, or marginal grades or GMAT scores. In these situations, we take the time to understand the circumstances and help our clients make the best decision. Overall, we suggest that you be judicious around what you include or omit in an optional essay since this can send a signal to Admissions about your personal judgment.

If you have questions about your own situation and how to approach your optional essays or other admissions questions, we are happy to provide a free 30-minute consultation. Please [click here](#) to contact us.

Admitted to multiple schools? 6 tips on how to make the right choice.



Whenever we're worried about a Veritas Prep initiative being too successful, resulting in being bombarded by potential applicants, our Vice President of Marketing Scott Shrum likes to say, "That's a good problem to have!" If you've been admitted to multiple MBA programs and now need to choose among multiple offers, congratulations! You've definitely got a *Scott Shrum Good Problem to Have*™. We recommend keeping the following points in mind as you decide your destiny:

1. You can almost never make a wrong decision.

Assuming that you were thoughtful when you initially decided to apply to business school, then you conducted research ahead of time and only applied to schools that would enable you to achieve your goals. If this is the case, then you'll be choosing from among some outstanding programs! No matter which choice you make, you'll be headed to a good program for you. I think too many people stress out about "what if this" or "what if that" scenarios. It's highly likely that each school has pros and cons, but that there isn't an objectively *right* or *wrong* choice—it's completely up to you!

2. Ranking matters less than you think.

When applicants receive multiple offers, they tend to go straight to their ranking of choice (U.S. News, Businessweek, Financial Times, and so forth), and automatically assume that the highest-ranked school must be the right choice. There is far more nuance than that. If you decide to go to a #7-ranked school rather than a #4-ranked school, will that have a major impact? Probably not.

However, certain schools will provide more opportunities immediately upon graduation and for years to come. Take a look at the following chart and then read our advice below:

Tier 1	Stanford, Harvard
Tier 2	Wharton, Chicago Booth, Kellogg
Tier 3	Columbia, MIT Sloan, Berkeley-Haas, NYU Stern, Tuck, Duke, Yale, Michigan Ross, UCLA Anderson
Tier 4	UVA Darden, Cornell Johnson, UT McCombs, UNC Kenan-Flagler, Indiana, Georgetown
Tier 5	Other U.S. MBA programs

We know that there will be significant debate around which tier these schools belong in, but the principle is the same: If you have the opportunity to move up **two or more** tiers, then we recommend that you take that opportunity 100% of the time. For example, if you were admitted to Stanford and UCLA Anderson, we would recommend Stanford every time. If you were admitted to Kellogg and Georgetown, we would absolutely recommend attending Kellogg. These schools will simply offer more name recognition and professional opportunities down the line.

However, if you are admitted to two schools that are within the same tier or just one tier apart, such as Wharton and Columbia or Chicago Booth and Berkeley-Haas, the choice should not be automatic. Your personal goals and circumstances will play a huge role.

(See the points below.) For example, one of the Veritas Prep cofounders, Chad Troutwine, was admitted to both Wharton and Yale (among other schools). He visited both campuses and absolutely fell in love with Yale. Even though Wharton was several spots higher in the rankings, he chose to attend Yale School of Management and has never regretted it. Don't let a few spots in the rankings dramatically sway your decision—it won't matter.

3. Consider professional opportunities, resources, and on-campus recruiters.

One of your key considerations—hopefully before applying—should be whether the school can provide you with the professional opportunities you seek. If you're looking to go into a traditional post-MBA career track such as management consulting or investment banking, pretty much any of the top-10 programs will provide you with opportunities. Sure, Kellogg and Berkeley-Haas send far fewer graduates into finance than similarly-ranked competitors, but the number isn't even close to zero. However, if you're looking to go into a niche industry such as energy, real estate, insurance, or healthcare administration, your school selection becomes much more important. Perform an internet search with the name of your target school and the words "employment report" to find out the percentage of graduates they send into your target industries and the companies that recruit on campus. A far lower-ranked school may be a much better choice than a program that's ranked higher overall but has severely limited academic and professional resources in your target field.

4. Geography plays a larger role than you might expect.

Schools rated #25 through #50 in national rankings are often criticized by applicants as being "too regional." While it's true that schools who fall in this category often attract more regional than national recruiters, applicants tend to ignore geography when considering the highest ranked MBA programs. Veritas Prep has conducted extensive research in this area and has found that even the highest-ranked programs of Harvard and Stanford are more regional than you might think. For example, 61% of 2014 Stanford MBA grads remained in the western United States, and 40% of Harvard grads stayed in the northeast. The trend is similar across all business schools in the top 25—the highest percentage of graduates take jobs in the same region as their school. Of course, that doesn't mean that you're doomed to stay in Philadelphia if you attend Wharton, or will never escape New York City if you attend NYU Stern. Graduates move away from their MBA cities all the time, but the mix of on-campus recruiters will be different depending on the geography of your school.

5. Campus culture will probably matter most.

If you conducted proper research on the schools before applying, then you likely applied only to schools that will provide you the proper professional opportunities listed above. As such, the criterion upon which most MBAs ultimately make their decision is cultural fit. Would you prefer an urban, suburban, or rural setting? Would you like a large graduating class with a larger alumni base, or a smaller class with a more tight-knit network? Are you looking for a more formal or more casual atmosphere? Are you looking for an environment where clubs and extracurricular activities drive much of student life, or would you rather a program where your social life centers more on your section, career ambitions, or other networks? A campus visit is the best way to determine whether a school "feels right" to you, and the admitted student weekend is a great way to meet future classmates and get a sense of whether you fit in. However, if you're unable to travel to campus, I would highly recommend connecting with as many current students

and recent alumni you can. Ask them about the good, the bad, and the ugly! Ask about the thing that surprised them the most about attending the school. Ask where they lived, and whether they would recommend living near there or elsewhere. Ask about transportation and whether most students have cars. Ask as many practical questions as you can about what your life will look like for the next two years.

6. It's in your hands to make your decision the "right choice."

One thing many people forget is that once you've made a choice in life, it's up to you to then move forward and make it the right choice *for you*. Rather than looking backward to think about what "might have been," make your decision with all the available information and then do everything in your power to be successful. If you decide that you'd rather go to a school where you fit in better culturally but that has fewer professional resources in your target industry, that's fine! Just know that you're going to need to pound the pavement more to accomplish your goals. There will always be trade-offs in every decision, but you can feel confident in making a choice if you recognize that it's ultimately up to you to decide and then move forward to take advantage of every available resource to make it a success.

If you would like additional insights from an MBA admissions expert to help guide your decision, please feel free to reach out to Veritas Prep at any time. You may submit your profile at veritasprep.com for a free evaluation and input, or purchase a small package of hourly consulting to work one-on-one with one of our qualified consultants.