



# Full-Time MBA Application Guide

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## How to Get In

Business leaders aren't born—they're made and molded over the course of their professional journeys. For many of today's most innovative and influential leadership talent, a key step on their journey was going to business school and earning an MBA, which for generations of leaders has been the proven path to management positions across industries, organization types, and continents. An MBA adds tremendous value to your career, equipping you with the in-demand skills, credibility, network support, and career opportunities to have long-term success in an increasingly dynamic global economy.

The question is: how do you get into one of your top choice MBA programs?

**The business school application process is a unique challenge for any applicant—regardless of their qualifications—and a little insider advice can go a long way toward getting that acceptance letter you've been dreaming about.**

Throughout this guide, we provide you with the information and guidance you need to craft applications that elevate your story and help you stand out from the pool of other qualified applicants.



# Your MBA Story

A critical but often overlooked first step to conquering the MBA admissions process is taking the time to think through the story you want to tell with your applications. If you haven't yet, check out the **first guide** in our early professionals' MBA admissions process guide series for detailed, step-by-step guidance on how to be thoughtful about presenting yourself and framing your personal brand for your applications.

Here's a tidy summary of our advice on crafting your MBA story.

## More on mba.com

[Developing a Successful MBA Story](#)

[Are You Ready for Business School?  
Here's Your Self-Assessment Checklist](#)



### Self-reflection

Conveying who you are, your background, and your accomplishments is key to weaving your MBA story into the various parts of your applications and articulating why accepting you into the program will add value to the class and enrich your classmates' MBA experiences. Take some time to reflect on who you are, where you come from, and what you've already accomplished in your life and career. These will be the key building blocks of your story.



### Articulate your goals

MBA admissions committees want to understand not only who you are and where you come from but also where you want to go and what you want to do. It's critical that you articulate your career goals in a way that is clear, compelling, logical, and achievable. Research your career goals, determine which skills you need to achieve them, and think through how an MBA will help you fulfil your short-term goals—leading to your long-term career vision.



### Answering “why an MBA?” and “why now?”

In evaluating candidates, MBA admissions committees want to understand how their program's experience and resources will contribute to your professional goals and why now is the right time for you to take this step, so it's critical that you spell it out clearly and persuasively. It's important that you be as specific as possible and relate the timing of your decision to your career goals. Don't shy away from any personal circumstances that may be driving your timing, but always connect it back to your career development.

### → Pro tip

As you get started shaping your story, it can be helpful to involve people close to you. How does a colleague or close friend describe you? What they say may differ from your own self-assessment and reveal something interesting. You may have taken a personality assessment like the Birkman Method or StrengthsFinder as a part of your job. Now's a good time to revisit your results and understand what they say about you.



# The GMAT™ Exam

The GMAT exam is the leading graduate business school admissions exam, accepted by more than 7,000 programs globally. Taking the GMAT exam signals to schools that you're serious about getting your MBA, and earning your best score helps you stand out during the admissions process. Schools trust that the GMAT is a proven predictor of your ability to succeed in their classrooms.

## More on mba.com

[GMAT Exam Prep: Identify Your Strengths and Weaknesses](#)

[How Long Should You Prepare for the GMAT Exam?](#)

[Official GMAT Exam 8-Week StudyPlanner](#)

No matter who you are, you need to prepare for the GMAT exam. Here's a collection of advice from the makers of the GMAT exam for earning your best score.

### Understand the test

The GMAT exam is an assessment of the skills that matter most in business. There are four separately timed sections: Analytic Writing Assessment, Integrated Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Verbal Reasoning. The Quant and Verbal sections are computer adaptive, which means the difficulty of the test tailors itself in real-time to your ability level. Get started by using the [GMAT™ Official Guide](#) to learn the exam's sections, pinpoint weak areas, and create custom practice sets.

### Get to know the questions

GMAT exam question formats themselves are unique and take some getting used to. Questions in each section of the Official Guide are organized by difficulty level: easy, medium, and hard. Start at the beginning and work your way up to more difficult questions as you begin to identify your strengths and areas to improve.

### Prep smarter, not harder

Your time is important, so you need to maximize the impact of your GMAT prep time. Focus your prep with the Official Guide Online Question Bank, which allows you to create practice sets by question type and difficulty. Time management will be key on test day, so practice in exam mode with the online version of the Official Guide and develop a sense of when to work through a question and when to make an educated guess and move on.

### When to retest

If you take the test and fall short of your target score, don't despair! It's very common for applicants to retest. MBA programs generally accept your highest score, so if you have time before your deadlines and a realistic expectation of improving, it may be well worth your time and effort to retest. Keep in mind that you can only retake the GMAT exam every 16 days, no more than five times in a year, and eight times in your lifetime.

### → Pro tip

In advance of your test day, carefully review the [GMAT Handbook](#) to be sure you understand all the rules and policies related to taking the exam. The GMAT exam is available at [testing centers](#) as well as [online](#) in most countries. [Read this article](#) on mba.com to understand the similarities and differences between the two ways to take the exam.



# Applications

If the thought of the MBA admissions process makes you feel overwhelmed and anxious, take a deep breath and take comfort in the fact that many, many people just like you have been down this road before—and successfully navigated their way into one their top choice programs. We're here to help you every step of the way!

Here is some basic information and advice for you to keep in mind as you get started with the process.

## Application rounds explained

Many MBA programs have different application rounds, which means programs have multiple deadlines by which they accept applications. Often there is one in the fall, one in the winter, and one in the spring. Specific MBA programs differ in the number of rounds they offer and their timing, so be sure you understand how it works for your target programs. Some programs have as few as two rounds, while others have as many as five. Programs consider all applications submitted by the deadline for a specific round before moving on to the next round. Alternatively, some programs offer rolling admissions, in which applications are considered as they come in, and there is only one deadline.

## Strategy

As a rule of thumb, you have a greater chance of getting accepted (and possibly earning a scholarship) the earlier you apply. Applying in Round 1 signals to admissions committees that you're serious about enrolling in their program if accepted. If you're ready and your application is as strong as it can be, apply in Round 1 to your top choice programs. Generally speaking, subsequent rounds will be more competitive, so set your expectations accordingly.

## Waitlist

Being waitlisted means you are neither admitted nor declined for admission but may still be admitted if spaces become available. If you're still interested in attending, you should first understand the program's waitlist policies. For programs that encourage contact from waitlisted applicants, consider providing them with a written update to express your continued interest in admission.

## → Pro tip

Are you applying in Round 3 (or later)? You can still get in! If this is you, think especially hard about how your MBA story is different or unique, as programs may be more inclined to add someone to the class in Round 3 if they bring something truly unique to the table. Also, consider using the optional essay to explain your application timing. If your job circumstance changed or you planned to apply for the next year but decided you were ready now, provide the admissions committee with that context.



# Essays and Short Answers

MBA application essays and short answers are your opportunity to move beyond your GMAT exam scores, undergraduate GPA, and resume and reveal something deeper about yourself to the admissions committee. Essay topics vary by program but often focus on your career goals.

Follow these top tips for writing MBA admissions essays that stand out from the stack and effectively tell your story.



## More on mba.com

[Top Five Tips for Writing Compelling MBA Admissions Essays](#)



### Answer the question!

First and foremost, you must answer the question being asked of you. This sounds like simple advice, but it's a common lament of admissions committee members that applicants skate around the basic question. While some creativity and outside-the-box thinking is encouraged, stay focused and don't get too cute.



### Be selective and succinct

Remember, the admissions committee will be evaluating you holistically. They'll read your resume and transcript, so don't write your complete life story in your essay. Focus instead on sharing a few key highlights with dashes of interesting details. The fewer things you try to cover, the easier it will be to do this.



### Authenticity

Don't write what you think the admissions committee members want to read. It's critical that you convey your authentic voice through your writing and tell your story only how you can tell it. The biggest asset you have in the admissions process is what makes you uniquely you, so don't throw that away by trying to be someone you're not.

### → Pro tip

Keep your language simple. Your writing should be easy to follow, so avoid flowery prose or jargon. Your word choices should convey why you are someone others would want to study with, learn from, and eventually be inspired by. That type of person is relatable and down to earth, and your essays should demonstrate these qualities.



# MBA Resume

Just about every full-time MBA program will ask that you submit a resume as a part of your application. Sorry, but the last resume you used to apply for a job won't cut it for your MBA application. A business school resume differs considerably from a professional one since each accomplishes a different goal.

Here's useful advice for crafting an MBA resume that elevates the parts of your educational and professional journey that will help you stand out to admissions committees.



## More on mba.com

[The MBA Resume: Five Common Mistakes to Avoid](#)



### Understand what makes an MBA resume different

The most important thing to keep in mind with your MBA resume is that you are selling the reader on your future potential, not necessarily your past. It should show how you've gone above and beyond in your roles, demonstrate how you've been a leader, and ideally describe the results your leadership has generated.



### The right kind of detail

Don't list bullet after bullet from your job description. Shift your thinking from sharing the details of your role to highlighting your key achievements. Show the admissions committee how you excelled in your role by highlighting a few notable projects, including details of your impact.



### Emphasize transferrable skills

The admissions committee isn't interested in the specific technical skills relevant to your current role. Instead, focus on transferrable skills like strategic thinking, data analysis, project management, and most of all, leadership. Keep in mind that leadership can come in multiple forms, even if you haven't managed a team or a project. Think about teamwork and communication.



### Growth and outcomes focus

Lessons learned, takeaways, and results are actually the most important items to include in your business school resume. Highlight outcomes that demonstrate your growth over time as well as your impact on business performance. The more specific and measurable your results are, the better.

### → Pro tip

Your MBA resume should show your different sides—not just your professional side. Successful business school students are active outside of work— in communities, athletics, or organizations. They have hobbies and language skills or get involved on their campuses or projects outside their jobs.



# Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are the one part of your application you don't author yourself, providing admissions committees with perspectives from people who know you and your work well. Being smart about who you ask, giving them some light coaching, and managing the process are all important to ensure that your letters add to the strength of your overall application.

## More on mba.com

[Letters of Recommendation Made Easier](#)

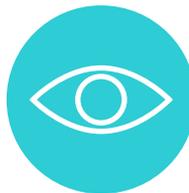
[Expert Tips for Letters of Recommendation](#)

Most programs require two or three letters of recommendation, and some specify the types of people they want to hear from. Be sure to follow the instructions carefully and keep these tips in mind.



### Choose the right recommenders

It all starts with identifying the right people to speak on your behalf. Pick people who know you well and you're confident will put in the effort to write a strong letter. Focus less on fancy titles and more on the depth of your relationship. One recommender should be your current or a recent supervisor, and other good candidates are indirect supervisors, peers, or someone you've volunteered with.



### Give them guidance and insight

Don't assume they know what they're doing. Meet or call your recommenders and make sure they know what's expected of them and understand your MBA story. You may want to remind them of specific projects that you positively impacted or demonstrated leadership on so they can detail it in their letter. Frame their thinking by asking them to be your advocate through providing specific examples of your strengths, qualities, and potential. General platitudes aren't going to cut it—ask that they include specific anecdotes.



### Leave plenty of time

Plan to give your recommenders the time they need to produce a quality letter. Springing a last-minute request on them will not result in a good product. It's ultimately on you to make sure they submit by the deadline; take a polite but proactive approach. Engage with them at least eight weeks in advance and follow-up after three weeks.

### → Pro tip

Make sure you appropriately thank your recommenders! It's not an insignificant ask you're making, so be sure they know you appreciate their time and effort. A handwritten note is a nice touch. Keep them up to date on where you are in the application process, or at least close the loop with them when you make your enrollment decision.



# Interviews

Generally speaking, interviews are for those applicants who programs are seriously considering admitting, so you should view it as an encouraging sign if you get called for one. Though your first reaction may be to get nervous, rest assured that with some forethought and preparation, you'll be in a great position to leave the interviewer with a positive impression and help your case for admission.

Here's a collection of our best guidance for shining in your interview.

## More on mba.com

[Strategies for Acing the Most Common MBA Interview Questions](#)

[10 Most Common Business School Interview Questions](#)

[5 Questions to Ask During Your MBA or Master's Admissions Interview](#)



## Questions to anticipate

Be prepared to discuss your strengths and weaknesses, why you want an MBA from this school, what you can bring to the business school community, and what your future career goals are. They may also ask you about career decisions you've made, how you react to feedback, and what makes you stand out among other candidates. They'll definitely throw in some curveballs but having answers to these basic questions is key.



## How to prepare

Ask a friend or colleague to practice with you so you can get comfortable providing clear and confident answers to common interview questions. Your responses should be well structured and thought through, but your delivery should come across as natural and unrehearsed. Take your practice seriously and get in the right headspace. Plan for the interview to last no more than 30 to 45 minutes.



## Nailing It

Above all else, remain professional and maintain your focus and presence throughout the interview. Making a personal connection with the interviewer by expressing interest in them can make a good impression, but don't overdo it. Don't distract from the task at hand, which is for you to listen, answer their questions, convey your MBA story, and demonstrate your emotional intelligence and verbal communication skills.

## → Pro tip

Don't just prepare for what questions you'll be asked, but also for what questions you want to ask the interviewer. Asking thoughtful questions is not only a chance to learn a little bit more about the program, but also an opportunity to demonstrate that you're serious about wanting to enroll. Most interviewers will save time at the end of the interview for this, so be patient and wait for them to ask for your questions. Don't ask questions that are answered on their website.



# International Applicants

Earning your MBA outside of your country of citizenship can be a transformative experience, leading to tremendous value for your life and career. Every year, thousands of internationally minded applicants make the choice to study abroad for business school.

Applying to be an international student comes with some additional requirements that you should be fully aware of before beginning the admissions process. Here's what you should know to get started.



## More on mba.com

[GMAT Prep for Non-Native English Speakers](#)



### Transcript evaluation

Different MBA programs have different policies around submitting your undergraduate transcripts, so closely review the requirements of your target programs. If your undergraduate transcript is in a language other than English, you typically will need to provide the original and a certified translation. You may also be required to verify your transcript through a third-party agency like [World Education Services \(WES\)](#). You'll need to factor in time to complete these tasks.



### English language proficiency

MBA applicants who completed undergraduate programs in which the sole language of instruction was not English are typically required to earn a passing score on an English language proficiency exam like the [Test of English as a Foreign Language \(TOEFL\)](#), [International English Language Testing System \(IELTS\)](#), or [Pearson Test of English \(PTE\)](#). If this applies to you, factor preparing for and taking one of these exams into your application timeline.



### Student visas

After you've been admitted to a program and decide to enroll, you will need to apply for a student visa to study internationally. In most popular study destination countries, the process is fairly straightforward, but it's strongly encouraged that you be familiar with the requirements before starting the admissions process. Countries like the [United States](#), [United Kingdom](#), [Canada](#), and [France](#) have websites with details about obtaining a student visa.

### → Pro tip

Because there's more for you to do as an international applicant, you should plan to start your admissions process earlier. Strongly consider applying in Round 1 to give yourself as much time as possible to apply for your student visa before the start of your program, and keep in mind that some programs only allow international applications in Round 2 or earlier. Check out the international applicants' pages on your target schools' websites.



# Checklist

With the advice in this guide, you now have the understanding you need to craft applications that elevate your story and stand out from the pool of other qualified applicants. Now, it's a matter of making a plan and executing it.

Use this basic checklist to keep yourself on track throughout the process, adjusting it to meet your needs. Keep in mind that it isn't designed to be comprehensive but is meant to guide your thinking and ensure you don't miss any major application milestones.

The timing is based off when you plan to submit your first application. Don't stress if you feel like you're already behind! This timeline reflects a best-case scenario—you can do this in less time if you have to!

## 6 months out

- Begin developing your MBA story.
- Begin GMAT exam prep. Buy the GMAT Official Guide and get acquainted with the exam.
- International applicants – Review the transcript and English language proficiency requirements of your target programs.

## 5 months out

- Solidify your MBA story.
- Develop your MBA resume.

## 4 months out

- Take note of the deadlines for your target programs, which are typically announced in the spring, about four months in advance.
- Essay topics are typically also set at this time. Start thinking about how your MBA story relates to the essay prompt.

## 3 months out

- Take the GMAT exam. If you take the exam for the first time at this point, you still have time to retest if needed.
- Complete the first drafts of your essays and short answers. Ask others to review them and provide feedback.
- International applicants—Complete your English language proficiency and transcript requirements.

## 2 months out

- Engage with your recommenders. Discuss your MBA story and specifics for them to reference in their letters. Set their expectations.

## 4 weeks out

- Finalize your essays and short answers.
- Follow up with your recommenders. Make sure they understand your deadlines.

## 1 week out

- Have someone else do a final review of all your materials.

## Application deadline!

- Make sure you submit everything in advance of the deadline.
- Thank your recommenders and keep them up to date on the status of your applications.

## 1-month post-deadline

- Interview invitations will begin to be sent out. If invited, book your date and start prep.

### → Pro tip

Set notifications on your calendar app for key milestones to keep yourself on pace.

