

mbaMission
Complete Start-to-Finish
MBA Admissions Guide



by Jeremy Shinewald

About mbaMission

Since Ambassadorial Speechwriter and MBA Jeremy Shinewald founded mbaMission in 1999, we have worked closely with business school candidates from around the world, successfully guiding them through the entire admissions process (“from start to finish”) and ensuring that each of their unique attributes is showcased in a creative, compelling, and focused way. We are published authors with elite MBA experience who work one-on-one with clients to discover, select, and articulate the unique stories that will force admissions committees to take notice. We work on all aspects of the application process, helping to reduce candidates’ stress levels and maximize applicants’ chances of gaining admission to top American and international business schools.

mbaMission offers all candidates a free half-hour consultation (www.mbamission.com/consult.php).

About the Author

Before founding mbaMission, **JEREMY SHINEWALD** was chief speechwriter for the Ambassador of Israel to the United States, for whom he wrote more than 70 policy addresses. As his speeches were being published in the *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and other major international media outlets, Jeremy was also laying the foundation for mbaMission, helping a small number of applicants gain acceptance to top-tier MBA programs each year. Jeremy was admitted to several top domestic and international MBA programs himself and ultimately became one of the youngest members of his class at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business, where he was an admissions interviewer, wrote a Business Ethics case and a Small Business Acquisitions case, and was chosen by his peers to be Class Graduation Speaker. After graduation, Jeremy formally established mbaMission and has subsequently provided admissions consulting services to applicants from the United States and more than 25 other countries on six continents. Jeremy is a member

of the Board of Directors of the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants, an organization committed to upholding the highest standards of ethical practice in MBA advisory services.

mbaMission Contributors

Several of mbaMission's top consultants contributed to this publication. Here are just a few of the members of our incredible team.

While studying Philosophy at Yale, **ANGELA GUIDO** managed the *Yale Record*, the nation's oldest college humor magazine. Upon graduating, she moved to South Korea, where, in addition to writing for multiple local publications, she taught English as a second language and later coordinated writing and communications training programs at KPMG Korea. Angela joined the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) after completing her MBA at the University of Chicago, where she was named a Siebel Scholar and served on the Dean's Student Admissions Committee. During her two years as a consultant at BCG, Angela participated in writing *Treasure Hunt: Inside the Mind of the New Consumer*, a bestselling book by Michael Silverstein. Angela later served as Women's Initiative Captain and Recruiting Manager for BCG. In that role, she reviewed resumes, conducted case interview preparation sessions, and led workshops for hundreds of candidates to help them better tell their personal stories in interviews.

While earning her MBA from Harvard Business School (HBS), **MONICA OKRAH** was a Board Member of Harbus News Corporation and collaborated on *65 Successful Harvard Business School Application Essays*—a collection of essays and critiques that showcase the broad range of writing styles and creative content found in successful HBS applications. Before attending HBS, Monica was an Associate at Rice Financial Products Company, an innovative derivatives boutique in New York City, as well as an Investment Banking Analyst at JPMorgan Securities. Monica was also part of a start-up team at Red Ventures, an Internet marketing firm. Monica is an active member

and former Chief Marketing Officer of the HBS Alumni Club of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Having been admitted to several top domestic business schools and even earning a fellowship elsewhere, **ERIN FOLEY SCHUHMACHER** ultimately chose to attend HBS. There Erin worked on an independent study for a national retail franchise and served as an Ambassador for the admissions committee—hosting prospectives, leading campus-wide information sessions and participating in Q&A conference calls for newly admitted students. Before attending business school, Erin was a Research Associate for Donaldson, Lufkin and Jenrette and Banc of America Securities, where she authored and edited white papers on the retail industry. Most recently, Erin worked at Financial Risk Management, a London-based fund of hedge funds company, performing due diligence on investments and producing qualitative research reports. Erin currently volunteers with Upwardly Global, a nonprofit organization devoted to assisting legal, professionally trained immigrants in their job search process, and tutors inmates at Bayview Women’s Correctional Facility through the New York Junior League.

After earning her MBA with distinction from HBS, **JESSICA SHKLAR** worked at several Fortune 100 companies, including American Express and JPMorgan Chase, where she was the Quality Leader and a Senior Vice President for Chase Home Finance. Jessica is also a Six Sigma Master Black Belt, with specific expertise in Six Sigma deployment and initialization. She earned a degree in Anthropology from Harvard College, and was later Admissions Advisor at a small university in Los Angeles, where she worked closely with undergraduate, business school and other graduate school applicants throughout the admissions process. Jessica also developed and ran workshops for students across the country on how to write effective application essays and has written admissions materials, marketing brochures and several admissions-related articles.

After graduating from Harvard College, **AKIBA SMITH-FRANCIS** became a Management Consultant with McKinsey & Company, where her work focused primarily on the firm's Nonprofit Practice. She later received a joint MBA/MPA from HBS and the Kennedy School of Government. She has contributed articles on finance for *Moxy Magazine*, a magazine for young professional women, and is one of the founding members of the Board of Directors of Cool Kids Learn, Inc., which provides academic enrichment programs that help children build the love of learning they need to succeed in school and in life. She was also a founding member of the Smith Leadership Academy (no relation), a charter school in Boston. She is currently writing a book tentatively titled *Stepping Off the Path*, an anthology of advice and vignettes from people who left conventional careers to pursue their true callings.

The following *mbaMission Insider's Guides* are also available from mbaMission (online at www.mbamission.com/store.php), and more are being added regularly:

Columbia Business School

Duke University's Fuqua School of Business

Harvard Business School

Kellogg School of Management

MIT Sloan School of Management

New York University Stern School of Business

Stanford Graduate School of Business

Tuck School of Business

UC-Berkeley Haas School of Business

UCLA Anderson School of Management

University of Chicago Booth School of Business

University of Michigan Ross School of Business

University of Virginia Darden School of Business Administration

Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania

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Introduction



Introduction

After more than a decade of helping hundreds of MBA applicants get into top American and international business schools, we have learned a thing or two about what it takes to compel an admissions committee to send that coveted letter of acceptance. While we always work closely and meticulously with our clients to ensure their unique stories and qualities shine through in their applications, some of our advice boils down to key fundamentals: approach each essay with a brainstorming session, draft an outline, make personal statements truly personal, tailor your resume to the admissions committee's needs, approach your recommenders strategically and prepare extensively for your interviews. Now, via this book, we offer you our thoughts on these subjects so that you too can begin your journey toward the MBA of your dreams.

Many applicants are terrified at the prospect of applying to business school, and some approach the application process in a haphazard and ill-advised manner. As a result, the process often becomes extremely stressful, and results can be disappointing. We truly believe that with some basic organization, a simple strategy and helpful professional guidance, applying to business school can actually be enjoyable and rewarding, not to mention successful!

We encourage you to visit our Web site, www.mbamission.com, which includes complete and detailed analysis of all the top American and international business schools' essay questions, as well as a free weekly essay-writing tip. Explore our blog frequently, as we are constantly updating it and adding new free resources.

Of course, the information in this guide and the analysis and tips on our site are no substitute for working with a dedicated mbaMission professional. Each MBA candidate is unique. We all have distinct personal stories to tell, and we all face challenges in telling them. MbaMission consultants are specifically trained to ensure that you tell your stories in the most interesting

and compelling way—and that you take advantage of even the tiniest opportunity that might help you gain admission to your ideal MBA program.

We hope you enjoy this book. If you need any advice at all with respect to any element of applying to business school, please feel free to contact us for a free consultation.

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mbaMission

Visit our resource page: <http://www.mbamission.com/resources.php>.

You will find links to FREE mbaMission materials:

- Personal Statement Guide
- Brainstorming questions in a workable word format
- Resume templates in a workable word format
- mbaMission Admissions webinars
- More...

Long-Term Planning



Chapter 1

The Big Picture: Planning and Executing Your Business School Application

As you contemplate your long-term MBA plan, several questions will no doubt arise: “Are my grades good enough? What is a safe GMAT score? How much work experience will I need? Who should recommend me? Am I a well-rounded candidate?”

Before you begin working on your applications, understanding how competitive you are as a candidate is crucial. By considering this issue well in advance of your application year, you will be able to plan out the steps you need to take to become a competitive candidate, reduce your potential for disappointment and simplify the task of applying to business school. In the first part of this chapter, we will introduce you to the main aspects of your candidacy that the admissions committees will be evaluating. In the second part of this chapter, we will guide you along your journey by providing a one-year planning timeline to help you manage the process, ensuring that you maximize all possible opportunities along the way to enhance your candidacy. Many candidates will embark on this journey about one year before they plan to submit their completed application, but you can certainly adjust your calendar to fit your plans and get started even earlier.

Although we offer these practical steps, remember that no set “recipe” exists for gaining admission to a top MBA program. Your individuality is your greatest asset, and your personal/professional story will be crucial as you strive to differentiate yourself among an ultracompetitive pool.

Your Application from the Admissions Committee's Perspective

Your Numbers

Questions you might have:

- *What is a good GPA and a strong GMAT score?*
- *How much do these numbers matter?*
- *What should I do if my scores are low?*
- *What if I have not taken any business, finance or math classes since high school?*

The admissions committee's question:

- *Can you handle the work?*

When admissions committees examine your “numbers,” they ask themselves whether you will be able to handle their rigorously analytical and highly quantitative MBA program. Your GMAT score and grades will be the foremost indicator of your strengths in these areas, with the GMAT holding more sway the more time has passed since your college graduation. However, no particular set or level of scores will guarantee that you will get into a top school—some schools even brag about the number of 780s (considered a whopping GMAT score) they reject each year. The MBA admissions process is holistic, and all the aspects of your profile will be evaluated.

There is no hard and fast rule about what grades and scores are “good enough” for any given program. We recommend researching published statistics on average and median GPAs and GMAT scores at the school(s) you are target-

ing. For reference, the average total GMAT score at schools that are generally considered to be the top 15 programs (according to the Bloomberg *BusinessWeek* and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings) is about 710. If you are applying to one of these schools, you should aim for that score or higher. You should also strive for a balanced score, achieving an 80th percentile or higher on both sections of the GMAT (verbal and quantitative). In particular, an 80th percentile on the quantitative portion¹ will clearly indicate to the admissions committee that you can handle the difficult analytical work required in the MBA curriculum.

If you do not score 710 or higher, however, fear not! This is just the *average* score, which means that a good percentage of the previous class of admitted students scored below that—not everyone can be above average!

We recommend the following ways to help ensure you attain the best GMAT score possible before submitting your application:

- *Study for the test:* This advice may seem obvious to some, but many candidates do not fully understand that the GMAT is not a test that you can simply take “cold.” In fact, our friends at Manhattan GMAT inform us that to be truly well prepared for the exam, candidates should dedicate a minimum of 12–13 weeks to studying—nine weeks in the classroom and three to four weeks of self-guided study thereafter. These days, many test-prep options are available beyond the traditional classroom experience, including pure self-study with textbooks, online classes, private tutoring and simply practicing by solving problems from past GMAT exams. A number of free resources are available through the Manhattan GMAT Web site to help you maximize your score, and we recommend taking advantage of them, particularly the free sample GMAT test: www.manhattangmat.com/free-gmat.cfm

¹ It is worth noting that achieving an 80th percentile score on the quantitative section of the GMAT is becoming increasingly difficult, as scores continue to rise. Thus, some schools have begun to note that a 75 percentile score is a “safe” target.

- *Take the test sooner rather than later:* Many candidates do not realize that they can take the GMAT up to five years in advance of submitting their application. Admissions offices generally prefer test scores from the previous three years, but our point is that you should not feel that you must take the test only during the year in which you apply. Further, by taking the test earlier, you leave yourself sufficient time to take the test again (you can take the test only once per month) if you do not score as well as you had hoped. You may be surprised to know that admissions committees actually encourage candidates to take the test multiple times—they want you to do your best, and higher average GMAT scores, which factor into MBA rankings, can help to boost a school’s position. By taking the GMAT early, you will also free up time closer to the application deadline to dedicate to other aspects of applying to business school.

Your GMAT score will be especially important if you graduated from college more than five years ago or if your undergraduate GPA was below the average for students at your target school(s) (approximately 3.5 for the top MBA programs noted earlier). Although we recommend making every effort to achieve the best score you possibly can, you should take care not to focus on your GMAT to the exclusion of all else.

Admissions committees consider your GPA another important indicator of your ability to succeed in the challenging academic environment of an MBA classroom. But as with your GMAT score, there is no “right” GPA. In evaluating your transcript, admissions committees will take into account your grades, your major, the institution you attended (though to a lesser degree), any trends over time (e.g., did you get all As toward the end of college that offset a few early Cs?) and the nature and rigor of your course of study. In particular, they will look for evidence of some quantitative horsepower. If your transcript does not include any management, economics, finance or math classes that prove you have done well in quantitative subjects in the past, you will need to find another way to prove your competencies in these

areas. Fortunately, doing so is definitely possible. For example, if nothing on your transcript or in your work history indicates your ability to manage the quantitative work required by an MBA program, you can build up what is referred to in the admissions world as an “alternate transcript” before you apply by taking two courses at a local college in any of the following areas: accounting, finance, economics, statistics and calculus. Whichever subject you choose, you will need to do well for the course to reflect positively on your candidacy—a B+ is acceptable, but an A is far better if you are trying to prove that you can compete amid a quantitatively strong peer group at the MBA level. Alternatively, you might consider completing Level I of the Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, which would reveal that you have the maturity and drive to dedicate yourself to a rigorous self-guided study program and that you have strong pre-MBA knowledge of the academic areas noted earlier. (Note: the CFA program can be remarkably time-consuming, and we recommend completing Level I well in advance of your application year.)

Although your GPA and your GMAT score are important, high scores do not guarantee success in the application process, and low scores do not guarantee failure. We have seen candidates with 540 GMAT scores get into Harvard and applicants with 780s fail to do so. Our point? The admissions committees will examine your profile **holistically**, attempting to appropriately gauge your qualities as both an individual and a professional, plus your potential to contribute to your class and to achieve in your career. Stats are only one factor in their broader decision.

Your Goals

Questions you might have:

- *What kinds of goals are the right goals to have?*
- *How specific is specific enough?*

The admissions committee's questions:

- *Will the program really be of value to you?*
- *Will you make the school proud as an alumnus/alumna?*

Defining post-MBA goals is difficult for many candidates. Most people applying to business school recognize that the degree will pay dividends beyond what they can anticipate, open doors in their career regardless of the direction they choose and provide an education that will be valuable in most business endeavors. Should that not be justification enough for seeking an MBA? Others pursue MBA studies to diversify their skills and discover new professional avenues. Should that not be encouraged?

Perhaps those reasons are sufficient for you, but consider the issue from the admissions committees' perspective. By offering you one of the very few, highly sought-after places in their program, they are essentially investing in you. They therefore want to know what you plan to do with that investment. Their goal is to provide value and create happy, successful alumni. They will look at your goals and aspirations to understand whether an MBA from their program will indeed further your goals and be of value to you—your ultimate success will reflect well on the school. For most schools, wanting an MBA just for the education is not enough. You have to have a plan for your—and their—investment.

Fortunately, there are no right or wrong career goals for a business school candidate, only more or less well thought-out ones. If you have a broad sense of what you want to do—maybe you have an industry in mind—but are not sure of your specific plan, we recommend doing some honest exploration of your goals well before you begin to apply. Perhaps, for example, you believe you want to work in finance in general but are unsure of what lies behind the buzzwords “investment banking,” “sales and trading,” “asset management” and “equity research.” In this case, take the time to do some research and explore the post-MBA opportunities that exist (a good way to generate career ideas is to visit different schools’ career services Web sites) and then take action to gain some a priori experience in your potential field or in the function that appeals to you via informational interviews and job shadowing. Understanding *how* an MBA will be useful in the area you are considering is key to effectively conveying your need for the degree to the admissions committees.

We recommend that when you discuss your goals in your essays, you be as detailed as you can credibly be without stretching your believability. (See our Personal Statement chapter for examples of the appropriate level of detail.) If the thought of committing yourself to a path now is daunting, do not worry. Admissions committees understand that people change their minds, especially as they learn more and are exposed to new options and information as part of the MBA experience. (No one will force you at graduation to adhere to the goals you present in your application!) You should keep in mind that an MBA is a significant investment of your time and money. So, if you are not sure that you will use the degree to further yourself in your career, it may not be worth your time and energy to pursue such an intense program. So dig deep, do some soul-searching and be sure to develop goals that really inspire you.

Your Professional Life

Questions you might have:

- *What is the right kind of experience?*
- *What if I have never managed a team?*
- *Do I have enough experience?*

The admissions committee's question:

- *Will you contribute meaningfully to the class/business school community?*

In addition to their desire to turn out successful leaders, business schools want to be sure that the candidates they admit will be able to participate meaningfully in the MBA classroom and bring a perspective to class discussions that will be valuable to their classmates. Your career trajectory and professional accomplishments (revealed through your resume, essays, recommendations and interviews) will be a strong indicator of your ability both to contribute to the class and to be a leader beyond.

As with some of the other elements of your candidacy that we have discussed thus far, no set rule is in place as to the “right” amount or type of work experience, nor is there a “right” career trajectory. Each year we hear from a few candidates who fear that their professional position is a liability: “I am a school teacher. Maybe if I transitioned to consulting, I would get into the school of my dreams.” Although bankers and consultants are certainly well represented at top business schools and teachers are not, this is not evidence of a bias among admissions officers, but instead of the nature of these workplaces. Most bankers and consultants need an MBA to progress past a certain point on the corporate ladder, whereas no teacher truly *needs* an MBA to progress.

What is more important than targeting a particular industry or position for the future is conveying your performance in past endeavors. Places are available in the MBA classes at all top schools for high-performing teachers, consultants and bankers alike—but not for low-performing individuals in any field. The leading business school programs want a diversity of experience in their classrooms, and they want candidates who exhibit the promise of achievement—not just a job title—going forward.

The admissions committees will examine your professional experiences to see whether you tend to take on increasing responsibility in your work. This may be evidenced by promotions or by simply having more impact on the bottom line of your department or company through informal influence (without a promotion). After all, the lowest man on the totem pole can have the greatest influence in a project's outcome if he is willing to speak up and get buy-in for his ideas.

The admissions committees are also interested in the kind of impact you have had on others, in either formal or informal ways, such as direct management, mentorship or training roles. If you have never managed another employee or a team, do not worry. Many candidates applying to business school are in the same position. Leadership and management are actually two different things, and admissions committees take both into account. Whereas management entails directly supervising other employees, leadership can include such broad interpersonal activities as mentorship, training, coaching, influencing and persuading others to adopt your ideas, taking responsibility for an outcome, helping a floundering teammate and creating open and productive communication within a team. More simply, for our purposes, management is the use of position to gain the best outcomes and leadership is the use of persuasion to gain the best outcomes. Examine your personal and professional history for these kinds of examples, and if examples are lacking, start looking now for opportunities to contribute to others and to take responsibility for the outcome of your work, so you will be able to discuss these in your application. If your job provides an insufficient outlet

for leadership, seek opportunities to lead in your extracurricular and community service activities.

At most top programs, students have an average of five to six years of work experience, but we remind you that an average derives from a wide range, meaning that some applicants will be above this figure and some will be below. Every year, candidates with varying degrees of experience gain admission to business school, and having more or less is neither “good” nor “bad.” The key is what you have been able to accomplish during your work history and the kind of potential this demonstrates for your post-MBA goals. Admissions committees will look beyond your industry, company name, title and years of experience and strive to identify **performance!**

Community Service and Other Volunteer Contributions

Questions you might have:

- *Do I really need to do community service?*
- *Is it too late to start?*
- *What if I work 8,000 hours a week?*

The admissions committee’s question:

- *Are you someone who makes a difference and seeks out challenges?*

Aside from the sincere value that you can bring to your community by volunteering in some way, community work is an important element of your application. From an admissions perspective, contributing to others in this way shows initiative and motivation on your part and can differentiate you from otherwise similar candidates who do not go the extra mile. For ex-

ample, if you take time outside of work to volunteer with the aged while your peer from work who is also applying to business school instead uses that time to shop or watch TV, all else being equal, you have a distinct advantage. Showing personal commitment to and passion for a cause or organization and seeking leadership opportunities outside of work indicate that you have strong personal qualities and provides the admissions committee with deeper insight into your candidacy.

Still, some applicants mistakenly regard any form of community service as a prerequisite for getting into a top MBA program. These candidates will thus sign up for a volunteer activity without first considering whether it is a reasonable fit for them and/or how their choice could reflect on their candidacy in the admissions committees' eyes. Although community service is a positive, it is not a "one size fits all" element of one's candidacy. As you contemplate your current or potential community involvements, you should recognize that "hours served" are not as important as the spirit of your participation and the extent of your impact.

We therefore encourage MBA candidates to carefully consider their community experiences in the same way they would examine and evaluate their professional or entrepreneurial opportunities. Although people can sometimes make mistakes in their career paths, most gravitate toward areas or opportunities in which they can excel, justifiably to further their own interests. The same is true for volunteer opportunities as well. If, for example, you have always enjoyed a particularly close relationship with your grandmother and want to share this kind of positive experience with others, you might decide to volunteer to spend time with seniors at a retirement home, where you would naturally be predisposed toward success. If you were quite passionate about your work there, you just might get others involved, expand the volunteer program at the home, take greater leadership in the program and more. However, if you are not that passionate about the elderly, but there is a retirement home on your block, no matter how convenient it would therefore be to volunteer, doing so would likely be a mistake for you, because you would

lack the spirit of commitment/adventure necessary to ensure that your story materializes and would be compelling to the admissions committee.

Although accomplishments in the community arena can make great subject matter for essays and clearly illustrate that you seek to make a difference, your charitable involvement does not need to be with a registered nonprofit. For example, you can reveal your altruistic spirit through a simple personal commitment to a neighbor, relative or colleague—perhaps by helping them with a weekly chore or serving as a social outlet to someone with limited friends in the area—or perhaps via a small neighborhood beautification initiative or by organizing fitness classes for colleagues or friends. The key is not the organization, but your impact; you must show the admissions committees that you are someone who aspires to excellence, is interested in bettering the lives of others and seeks challenges and opportunities for leadership.

If you have not been involved in a community activity up to now, we can reassure you that it is never too late to start. Again, the admissions committees are interested in your impact and your altruistic spirit and commitment, rather than time served. However, the more time you can commit to such an activity, the more opportunity you will have to truly influence and assist others and the more experiences you will be able to discuss in your essays and interviews. So, starting sooner rather than later is certainly beneficial.

However, perhaps you have had trouble committing to any volunteer activities because you work incredibly long hours. The admissions committees know that such jobs exist, and they will take this into account when evaluating your candidacy. That said, you can always find something to do outside of work to show that you are a well-rounded individual and interested in life. For example, try volunteering at a soup kitchen for a few hours each Sunday; look into online volunteering options; spend some vacation time volunteering internationally. Any effort you devote to a practice or organization outside your work will enhance your profile and give you potentially rich fodder

for your essays. We simply recommend finding something in which you are genuinely interested and pursuing that.

Your Recommendations

Questions you might have:

- *Why are recommendations necessary?*
- *Who should recommend me?*
- *Should they repeat what my essays say?*

The admissions committee's question:

- *What will others say about your accomplishments and character?*

Admissions committees consider recommendations for two key reasons. One, they want to learn about your accomplishments, strengths and weaknesses from a different perspective, and two, they want to understand how another person would assess your character. Your essays will provide them with rich, valuable information about you, and your recommendations will present an objective perspective on who you are.

Most schools ask recommenders very detailed and specific questions. We therefore suggest that you seek letters of recommendation from the people who know you best. Do not make the mistake of thinking that only a recommendation from someone with an impressive title will “count” in the eyes of the admissions committee. The admissions committees hope to gain a deep understanding of your character through your recommendations, and only someone who has worked closely with you will be able to comment vividly on who you are. For example, the CEO of your company may have an impressive resume herself, but if all she knows about you is *your* resume, her