

10 secrets to getting into a top MBA program

The competition to get into the best MBA programs is ferocious, but you can improve your chances of getting accepted by following these expert tips.



Getting accepted into a top MBA program is an arduous, time-consuming process with plenty of potential pitfalls along the way. As many of you already know, the most prestigious and selective schools in America – Harvard, Wharton, Stanford, and their ilk – are renowned for accepting only 10% of applicants.

We have compiled some advice from counselors, admission officers and private consultants, whose businesses thrive on helping MBA aspirants avoid ending up among the 90% that don't make the cut. Read on to discover what those professionals counseled more than 1,000 hopefuls on how to wow the admissions committees at top B-schools.

Here are 10 tips for making a great impression.

someone who went there; meaning they try to be that person. What's wrong with that? Business school admissions committees want to accept a broad mix of different personalities and backgrounds. They want to know who you really are, beyond your professional life, so make sure to include any significant work or life experiences. Tell your real story. Trying to be someone you aren't is likely to backfire.

1 Get a sky-high score on the Graduate Management Admissions Test.

The average student at the top 10 schools on *Fortune's* list scored 700 or higher on their GMATs. (Overall, GMAT scores range from 200 to 800. The median is 500.)

2 Be yourself. Don't try to attain some imaginary ideal.

Often people have an image in their minds of what type of person a given school wants because they know

3 Don't rush to submit your application in the first round.

Different schools operate on different schedules, but in general B-schools accept one round of applications in October and another in early January. Don't rush; it's important to submit a really great application. You do want to meet the deadline, of course, but quality counts more than speed.

4 Be ready to discuss any weak spots in your resume or undergraduate transcripts.

Let's say you've been laid off work. Don't ignore that on your application. Talk about how you bounced back and what you learned from that experience. Likewise, if you have a glaringly low grade or two on your transcripts, address the question of why that happened. Often people think, "Well, they know I'm smart, and that was a long time ago, so it's no big deal." But you need to explain it, because it will be noticed.

5 Recognize the importance of glowing recommendations.

A common mistake is to fixate on the essay portion of the application and overlook the key role of recommendations. Once references have agreed to vouch for you, it's essential to keep in touch with them to ensure the letters get submitted on time. But first ...

6 Make sure you've asked the right people.

Sometimes people will ask a CEO for a recommendation because that CEO attended their preferred school. Admissions committees want specific examples of how you work, especially in the areas of teamwork, leadership, ethics, and respect for others. The CEO isn't likely to know those details. Unless you work with the Big Boss on a day-to-day basis, ask your direct manager, a close colleague or a client instead.

7 Ask one or two people to review your application.

Don't overdo it. It's a good idea to ask one or two people whose judgment you trust to look over your application before you submit it, to see if they spot any flaws or omissions. However, if you ask for too many suggestions your essay will end up reading as if it were written by a committee, and you definitely don't want that.

8 If you end up on a "waiting list," make the most of it.

Often people assume that being put on a waiting list is the same as not being accepted and give up. However, many waitlisted applicants do get admitted each year, although there's an art to it. If your GMAT score was relatively low, take the test again. Send another recommendation or two, if you can. Keep in touch with the admissions committee. You don't want to hound them, but it's perfectly OK to send a letter if you get promoted or are working on a "stretch" assignment that broadens your skills.

9 Conduct your own research. Don't choose a B-school just by picking it off a list.

Every MBA program is different, and you want to focus on the ones that are right for you. Compare schools carefully and visit as many campuses as possible. If you can sit in on a class or two, so much the better. That way, when you're asked why you want to attend your chosen school you'll have a convincing answer, instead of sounding like you're reading from a brochure.

10 Start the process as far in advance as you can.

Taking the GMAT, researching schools, getting applications, lining up your recommendations and writing essays all take time. So, don't wait until the last minute. 🍀