



Book The MBA Reality Check

Make the School You Want, Want You

Evan Forster and David Thomas
Prentice Hall Press, 2010

Recommendation

This guide to winning a spot in an MBA program is useful and charming – and those two qualities are more closely related than you think. As the title suggests, the book attempts to correct numerous misconceptions applicants have about getting into their target business schools. Some of those myths and self-delusions are pretty tenacious, and education consultants Evan Forster and David Thomas have to be equally pointed to puncture them. That’s where the charm comes in. Through vivid narratives of learning experiences (both their own and their clients’) and hearty dollops of humor, Forster and Thomas make the arduous process of applying to MBA programs seem less daunting. Along the way, they provide specific advice on everything from how to help the people writing your recommendations to how to fit in the worthwhile extracurricular activities you need to stand out from the crowd. Naturally, *BooksInShort* recommends this sassy but savvy book primarily to those considering graduate education in business, but also to those running MBA programs, to their admissions staffs and to corporate human resources officers who want to help guide their employees’ careers.

Take-Aways

- To get into a good MBA program, apply to the schools that best fit you and your goals.
- Putting together a strong application requires considerable personal reflection.
- To perfect your credentials, engage in useful extracurricular or volunteering activities. The excuse that you’re too busy isn’t good enough.
- Admissions boards evaluate candidates based on their “stats, story and experience.”
- While your stats (grades and test scores) and your experience are relatively set, the story you tell in your application essays is completely under your control.
- Your essays must reveal your reasoning capacity and establish you as unique.
- Each essay question is different, but every essay response should display your leadership qualities.
- Select recommenders who know you well, and help them write good letters of referral by providing them with talking points and reminders.
- Dress professionally for interviews, and prepare answers to likely questions.
- If the school places you on a waiting list or rejects you, don’t give up; find out how to improve your application.

Summary

Mastering the Master’s

So you want an MBA, but you don’t want to get it from just anywhere; it’s got to be from Harvard Business School (HBS) and nowhere else. Well, that’s “a suicide mission.” Pinning all your hopes on a single school, when so much of the admissions process is out of your control, is crazy. Instead, make your school selection part of a larger process of realistic self-examination. Investigate the programs at a number of universities, and apply to the ones that best fit you and your goals. This will make it much more likely that you’ll get into a good MBA program (maybe even at HBS) and that you’ll be happier along the way.

“This book is about getting into the mind-set of taking risks and building a compelling candidacy from a place of strength...not fear or arrogance.”

Once you’ve committed to earning an MBA from a first-rate degree program, recognize that you have to be the sort of person that program wants. That doesn’t mean changing who you are or pretending to be someone else, but it does mean you have to find the “visionary leader in you.” You can’t game the process or thoughtlessly

knock out an application; rather, you'll need to search deep within to define your goal of "doing something greater than yourself with the intent to make a difference." Then direct the application process as you would guide any long-term project you hope to lead once you graduate.

The MBA Application Process

Every business school application seeks to elicit three facets of your life: your "stats, story and experience." Stats are objective, "quantitative measurements of your academic ability," consisting of your undergraduate grade point average (GPA) and the score you earn on the GMAT (the required standardized exam used for MBA admissions). Reviewers will examine your GPA in the context of how well you performed in courses such as calculus or economics. The GMAT has three parts that assess your "analytical, verbal and mathematical skill sets." Your final score, relative to other exam-takers, should be at or higher than the 80th percentile.

"The 'MBA reality check' is that your story plays a much larger role in whether you get accepted than most people ever imagine."

When thinking about your experience and extracurricular activities, shift your attitude. You can't claim you're too busy to do things outside of work. If you're applying to a competitive program, it's likely that all the other applicants are spending more than 40 hours a week at their jobs, too. And ladling food at a homeless shelter once in a while doesn't cut it with admissions committees. Instead, demonstrate that you have a leader's creative drive by integrating community service into your life. Do you spend time at the gym? Develop a program training inner city kids in fitness. "Create legacy" by preparing others to keep the program going when you leave.

"B-school admissions committees are unexpectedly holistic in the way they review candidacies."

Solicit letters of recommendation ("recs") to "augment, bring new information or corroborate" your application. Select people, like your current boss, who can best describe your work capacities. Admissions committees aren't impressed with recs from famous names or alumni. Helping your advocates write good recs is not only permissible but smart. Provide these busy people with "talking points" to remind them of what you've done, with specific details such as dates and achievements. Guide your sponsors to link any flaws they mention to "an opportunity for growth," and not to "cut and paste" your talking points into the rec. If you've prepared your recommenders well, you usually don't need to see the letters after they're complete, except in cases where the recommender is not a businessperson, such as a nonprofit or technical expert.

"Extracurriculars show us that a person has more than one dimension." (MBA director of admissions at INSEAD Caroline Diarte-Edwards)

All the elements of your application should combine to paint a very specific picture of your leadership abilities. Exposition of your past should send a clear message about your future, both in the MBA program and in your postdegree life. Make this outlook about more than just you. Don't consider the MBA as a prize in itself or as just a stepping stone to making millions. Instead, see it as a transformative tool you'll use to make the world a better place.

"The first rule of getting fantastic recommendations is to choose recommenders who know you well. So many people make mistakes on this and set mental traps for themselves."

What schools seek in terms of experience has changed in recent years. High-caliber business schools used to look for students with at least five years' experience, which includes work, personal interests and community service. But universities now admit more students coming directly from undergraduate studies. Regardless of when you apply, by the time you're ready for an MBA, your stats and experience are set, and there's little you can do to change them. You can, however, change your story, which you'll relate in the application essays.

Writing Your Application Essays

Your résumé outlines your professional background, your recs tell the admissions committees what others think of you, and your stats will give them some sense of your academic abilities and preparation. The application essays give you a chance to share your story with prospective schools, and to show them how your mind works and how you envision leadership. But avoid some common pitfalls:

- **Don't write "essays by committee"** – well-intentioned but clashing advice will dilute the sense of you that should shine through your writing.
- **Don't try to guess what the committee wants to hear** – you can't know this, and trying to figure it out will get in the way of sharing your own story.
- **Don't play it safe** – forget the mundane, expected platitudes. You're competing for admission against accomplished people, so your story has to stand out, not blend into the crowd.

"Embrace who you are – the good and the not so good. Embrace your strengths and your weaknesses. This is what smart leaders do. They don't whine and they don't get proud. They get busy."

For the same reason, be specific: Everyone wants to succeed in business or make a difference. What exactly do you want to do? How will getting an MBA enable this goal? Devote much of your writing to explaining the "why" of your objectives.

You might be asked to write one or more of the following types of essays:

- **"The career goals essay"** – Many colleges will ask you to write an essay on your long-term career objectives. A good essay demonstrates self-knowledge and how you and the school are a good fit. Be very specific; articulate "transformational goals" that will change the world, not just get you paid. Think about your passions and how you can leverage them into a life-changing career. And don't allow "other people's expectations" to deter you. For example, an investment banker got past the fear of his father's rejection when he wrote about wanting to finance wrestling matches. A candidate from India showed some "dazzle" when he described his plan to popularize jazz in his country.
- **"The accomplishments essay"** – Harvard, Yale and other schools ask applicants to explain their greatest achievements, or what they're "most proud of and why." Because universities want to gauge whether you "act on your values," analyze the reasons behind the accomplishments about which you write. If you've done something that is the first or the best of its kind, expound on that. Focus on an instance in which you "went above the call of duty" and created something of lasting value to the community. This means looking "past the obvious" to distinguish yourself from other applicants.

- **“Leadership essays”** – Since everyone who applies to superior MBA programs either is a leader or wants to be one, it isn’t enough to declare in your leadership essay that you want to be one, too. Instead, clarify “your leadership style,” and include examples that demonstrate your understanding of how you lead and how your approach affects others. Specific, concrete details are essential here. Don’t neglect to consider instances of “up-management”: One applicant wrote of how she rescued a failing deal by forcing her battling bosses to settle their differences in the first-class cabin of a trans-Pacific flight.
- **“Impact/opportunity essays”** – In these essays, admission committees want to know how you managed “the process of creating change” and how you evaluated the impact your efforts had. In this test of your “entrepreneurial mind-set,” you still need to describe how you think and act, but you need to do so while “dissecting a process” that demonstrates your analytical ability. For example, if you were asked how you get to your favorite store, don’t just say, “I get in the car and drive.” Instead, focus on the process: “I decided to drive. I found my keys, opened the door, turned on the ignition, made a right out of the driveway...” You get the idea.
- **“Ethical dilemma essays”** – Several MBA programs require essays that want you to “describe an ethical dilemma and...how you resolved it.” Too often, applicants misunderstand the challenge: The essay’s purpose is not to see if you’ll “choose right over wrong” but rather to uncover how you’d “extricate yourself from between a rock and a hard place.” The crux of an ethical dilemma is that more than one set of standards are at play; morality is about how you handle opting between “right and right,” or between competing values. For instance, if a colleague takes you into her confidence about a client’s inappropriate comments to her but forbids you to confront the client, how do you respond? Your goal is to display the sophistication of your reasoning and your character as you explain your resolution.
- **“Failure essays”** – This is another favorite of admissions committees – and another instance where applicants often dodge the core challenge as much as they can, which is understandable. If you’re applying to an MBA program like Wharton’s or Columbia’s, you want to reveal your successes rather than focusing on – or even admitting to – your failures. Nevertheless, how you deal with failure tells program officers much about your leadership ability. Select a real fiasco (not a mistake that you kept from affecting your performance), explain it honestly, and address the emotional and ethical implications.
- **“Whimsical” and other open essays** – Some schools like to put you on the spot by asking quirky questions, such as what sort of tree you’d like to be or who’d you choose to have dinner with if you could invite any three people in the world. These essays usually don’t relate directly to business at all, but they seek a glimpse of the person you really are, outside the confines of the office and academia. Regarding the dinner invitation question: Go beyond the obvious choices. Do not, for example, pick this week’s hot pop star or a famous athlete, and avoid inviting dead people; that’s too easy. Instead, search your own values to make original choices, and then explain why those people are meaningful to you.

The Interview and Beyond

A few schools, such as Kellogg and Duke, hold “open” interviews, which allow you to request a meeting on campus. Such a forum can work well for you if you’re stronger in person than on paper or if you want to explain “a black mark” on your application package. More common are Wharton’s and Harvard’s “invite only” interviews: Receiving that invitation means you’re a strong candidate.

“A question regarding an ethical dilemma, be it personal or professional, requires that everyone in the room is right.”

Now your task is to prepare. Think through your answers to the questions they’re most likely to ask. Don’t memorize a script, but do formulate responses that address why you want an MBA, what your goals are, how that particular university’s program fits those objectives, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and so on.

“The ultimate test of leadership is how you respond to – and write about – failure (yes, even you have failed).”

If the application essays didn’t ask you to discuss your leadership capacity or achievements, expect quizzing on those subjects. As in the essays, make a point of letting the admissions committee understand your character and your reasoning processes. Dress professionally for your interviews: Men should wear a dark suit and a “bold” tie, and women should wear a “conservative suit with heels.”

“Sitting for your interview is the culmination of everything you’ve learned so far. Now you just have to convert it from ‘on paper’ to ‘in person.’”

Rather than accepting you outright, a school may put you on its waiting list. If you’re wait-listed, recognize that it means you were good enough to be accepted, but that just one aspect of your application needs improvement. Find out what that is, and, if you still want to attend this school, fix it.

“There are many great MBA programs that are invisible to those of you for whom always making the top ten in every aspect of your life is what defines who you are.”

Some programs, such as the Johnson School at Cornell, will conduct an “application review” to tell you exactly where you are lacking. You might need to retake the GMAT to raise your score or attend a class to shore up some weakness in a specific area like calculus. Then, send the admissions committee an “update letter” advising them of your progress in amending your application. Include a new letter of recommendation from a different person. Finally, take the opportunity to travel to the campus so the committee can “put a face to the name”; stay in touch.

“Business schools are looking for visionaries and leaders, not functionaries.”

If your preferred school rejects your application, don’t be disheartened; you can reapply. First, uncover the flaws in your portfolio: a weak quantitative background, limited leadership experience or insufficient extracurricular activities, a lackluster story, unsuitable recommenders or a missing spark that distinguishes you from the pack. Refocus on your goal; test it against the “Forster-Thomas triangle”: “It works for me. It works for you. It works for a community.” Look for this balance, and try again.

About the Authors

Evan Forster and **David Thomas** run Forster-Thomas, Inc., an educational consulting service.