



MBA Action Plan: 6 Steps for the 6 Months Before You Apply

An Accepted.com Special Report

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Introduction

If you're in the middle of application season right now, than this guide may not be relevant to you, but if you are planning on applying to business school next year (either as a first timer or as a reapplicant), then it's important that you start out on the right foot. Staying organized and on schedule is key for admissions success.

So, the big question—what should you be doing now to prepare for the upcoming application season?

First and foremost, you're going to need to assess your qualifications. This means you're going to need to do some thinking about who you are, what you have done in the past, and how those things have influenced who you'd like to be and what you'd like to do in the future. In short, you're going to need to "[Know Thyself](#)."

Those who reflect on who they are and what their priorities are will have an easier and more successful time determining their goals and generating a realistic list of schools to apply to, not to mention be better positioned for writing their application essays later on in the process.

In this guide, we'll discuss the different steps you should take to assess your qualifications, determine your goals, and generate a school list.

So let's get started!

Assess Your Qualifications

Let's begin right now by talking about assessing the academic component of your qualifications:

You need to examine your grades and your GMAT score to establish where you stand amongst your competition academically. Yes, I know. Those numbers do not fully represent your intellectual horsepower, but they are important in the competitive admissions process.

[A low GMAT score or a low GPA](#) is not necessarily an MBA deal breaker. No adcom is going to admit or dismiss a candidate solely on one semester's poor GPA or a low verbal GMAT score without also reflecting on other numbers as well as the rest of the non-quantitative parts of the applicant's profile.

Average numbers vary according to school, as well as numbers within your demographic group. You should examine each of these aspects and weigh the strengths and weaknesses in your application as you assess your competitiveness.

That being said, there are certain numbers that *will* be significant hurdles. Say, for instance, you have a GPA of 2.9 and your top choice MBA program's GPA average is 3.5. In such a case, your chances of acceptance have just taken a major hit. If, on the other hand, that same applicant applies to a b-school with a GPA average of 3.2, then he or she may have a chance of acceptance, provided, the rest of the application is solid, or better yet, above average.

Here's another "it depends" situation: Overrepresented demographics—engineers or [investment bankers](#) from over-represented groups—will have a harder time getting into a top MBA program than a corporate finance executive from an under-represented background with the same stats. In such a case, a [GMAT score](#) in the lower part of the school's 80% range and a GPA of 3.3 may be just too low for one person and just high enough for another.

The point is, you need to examine the details of your scores and reflect on them in the context of a bigger picture.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Is one score low, but balanced out by other higher numbers? Can you provide other evidence of academic ability?
- Did your overall GPA improve as you matured through the college experience?
- Do you have [recommenders](#) who will vouch for your abilities—especially ones that the numbers don't reveal?
- Have you [chosen schools](#) that will view your scores as competitive?
- Have you taken additional college courses in an attempt to demonstrate your quant or verbal capabilities or to compensate for a less than stellar GPA?

You need to assess and interpret how you'll be perceived with such scores and numbers, and then [develop an application strategy](#) to address those issues.

Last but not least, it's not too late to [retake the GMAT](#) or to enroll in a college statistics course if you feel like these could help boost your profile.

Have MBA Admissions Questions?
Have an Expert Assess *Your* Qualifications!

Evaluate Your Work Experience

Here's another important criterion to think about when assessing your qualifications: work experience.

Adcoms look at applicants' work experience from two perspectives—quantitatively and qualitatively.

Your work experience shouldn't just amount to X number of years, but should have a significant impact on your development as a person and as a burgeoning business mind.

Most schools want a minimum of two years of significant work experience. The work experience “sweet spot” for most business schools is between three and six years, with eight years of fulltime work experience serving as an effective maximum—with exceptions. If you have less than the minimum or more than the maximum, then you may want to consider other options—like pushing off applying to b-school for a few years or applying to a master's program (for people with little work experience), or [applying to an executive MBA](#) program (for [people with work experience beyond eight years](#)) or a residential masters like the [Sloan Fellows programs](#). If none of these options appeal to you, be prepared to persuade skeptical readers that you need an MBA now.

When constructing your resume, and certainly when composing your application essays, be sure to emphasize quality. Be sure to show off GIM: [Growth](#), [Impact](#), and [Management Potential](#).

If you feel like your work experiences do not provide these three elements, then you may want to consider pushing off applying until you've acquired more qualitative work experience, or getting to work right away to make your job more significant.

Are You Ready to Apply to Business School?

Examine Your Leadership Skills and Personal Traits

The third element you'll need to examine in assessing your qualifications (in addition to your quantitative scores and your work experience) is your personal traits, with [leadership skills](#) at the top of the list.

This part of your personal assessment is important when it comes to determining school fit. By evaluating your own strengths and weaknesses, you'll get a better idea of [which MBA programs are right](#) or wrong for you.

Perhaps more than any other personal trait, the adcoms will be mining your application for [leadership](#).

If you want your leadership skills to stand out, you'll need to *show* through clear examples and [anecdotes](#) that you're a leader—not just *claim* that you are. If you can't think of specific ways in which you've exhibited strong leadership skills, then now would be an excellent time to start putting yourself in situations where you can show them, either through increased professional responsibility, greater [community service](#) commitments, or by expanding your role in a hobby, sports teams, music or arts group, etc. (In general, now would be a good time to bulk up your community service profile and/or your job responsibilities if you feel like they are lacking.)

Remember, a leadership skill is worthless if you can't show a quantifiable impact that stems from your role as leader.

Other important character traits you'll want to highlight in your application (and therefore think about and develop now) include [passion](#), communication/teamwork skills, and initiative. Again, the best way to prove that you possess these traits is to *show* them in your application through specific [examples](#) and anecdotes. If, in these early months, you encounter an example of a trait you'd like to highlight, jot it down—it may be of good use when it comes to sitting down and filling out your application.

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Leadership in Admissions

Determine Your MBA Goals

Once you've assessed *who you are* and *what your skills are*, you'll need to determine why it is that you want an MBA.

Before you apply to a top MBA program, you'll need to have a rather clear (albeit flexible) idea of *where you are* and *where you'd like to be going*. **Certain programs cater to students with different goals, and in order for you to best establish school fit (which is key in the school search and application process), you'll have to clarify [what your goals are](#).**

Define your goal in terms of industry and job function. Include location if that is important to you. Deciding that post-MBA you'd like to be an entrepreneur is really only the first step. Why are you interested in starting your own business? What sort of business are you considering? What skills and tools do you need to achieve those goals? Do you want to work for a firm that does what you're considering before starting up on your own? If so, which firms would you ideally work for? B-schools, and then later on recruiters, love motivated, goal-oriented students, and then potential employees.

Again, **nothing here is set in stone; but you should have [goals](#) that excite you and that motivate you to push forward in a given direction.**

Before defining what a goal *is*, I'm going to give a few examples of what a goal *is not*.

First, a goal is not a statement of general interest or a field you'd like to study. "I'm interested in consulting or investment banking or marketing," is not a goal. (Not only is it not a goal, but it is very likely a red flag to the adcom, and eventually, a ding.)

Second, a goal is not a general field you'd like to work in. "I'd like to work in marketing," does not constitute an MBA goal. As a person who has probably had some pre-MBA work experience, you should know better than to suggest that "marketing" is a proper job description.

Now, what *is* an MBA goal?

- An [MBA goal](#) is something specific that you want to **do** (not just study) in a particular field. While answering "Marketing" to the goals question won't cut it, explaining that you want to go into channel management in the software industry will certainly pin you as a goal-oriented, focused MBA candidate. Include as many details as possible to show that you've thoroughly thought what you what you are looking to learn and how you plan on utilizing those skills post-MBA.
- An MBA goal should be strong and focused enough to help you [narrow down your school choices](#). An applicant with an undefined MBA goal will face a serious challenge when it comes to whittling down that list of 20 MBA programs to a reasonable 5 or 6 (or even 7 or 8). You'll know your goals are solid when you look at School X and say, "There's just not enough of an emphasis on product development and technology for this school to be included on my list." [Different schools offer different strengths](#) and cater to different goals—you want a school that fits your strengths and goals. Therefore, as Socrates (or according to some, Pythagoras or Heraclitus) would say, "Know thy goals."

- An MBA goal is flexible. Yes, you want to present yourself as a highly focused, motivated, and goal-driven individual, but schools also know that many students modify their goal as they become aware of opportunities in business school. That's okay. If you develop a cogent plan for your career given your past experience and your goal for your MBA application, you will be able to do so again and again, as your goals and interests change both in business school and beyond.

Why Do You Want an MBA?
Make Sure You Know The Answer

School Research

Based on your goals and qualifications, you can now intelligently choose schools. Look at specialty [rankings](#) (*U.S. News, BusinessWeek*) for a quick start but don't rely on them blindly. Go thoroughly through school websites. [Read student blogs](#). Talk to current students and recent alumni.

Generate a [list of schools](#) that fall into one of the following three categories—reasonable reaches, on-pars, or safeties. It's best to choose at least one school from each category, though some may want to apply to more (applying to six or seven total is about average).

Here's a breakdown of these three categories:

- **Reasonable reach** – Acceptance to your reasonable reach is a bit of a stretch, but not impossible. A strong application could make your reasonable reach a reality.
- **On-par** – You have a solid chance of getting into your on-pars with a good application. Your scores and experiences make you a competitive candidate for these schools.
- **Safety** – You should have no trouble getting into the safety schools on your list. (Don't be too cocky though; slacking off and turning in a half-filled-out application will get you dinged even at the schools in this category!)

When determining which schools fall into which categories you'll need to keep in mind the following:

How does your [GPA and GMAT score measure up](#) with the averages of your target school? Are your skills and experiences particularly well matched with your target school? Are your goals in line with one school more than another? Look at the class profile for accepted students to your target programs to see how you measure up. Would you fit in?

Once you can answer these questions, you will have generated a realistic list of schools to apply to—and the more realistic your list, the better your chances are of gaining acceptance to at least some of them, if not all.

Which School is Right for You?
Find Out Before You Apply!

Visit Schools

For the last action item of what you can do now to optimize your chances of getting into a top b-school later, I'd like to focus on the importance of visiting schools.

Not sure whether you should take the time and money to [visit the b-schools](#) you plan on applying to? While some adcoms admit to awarding brownie points and some swear that whether or not you visit has no impact on your acceptance or rejection, I believe that if you have the opportunity to visit the b-schools on your list, then you should absolutely do so.

And it's not because of imaginary "brownie points," but because you will be a much better informed applicant after you visit a school than before. You'll know more about each school, its culture, and why that particular school appeals to you. You'll learn more about its teaching style, whether it supports your goals, and how well you and your goals match the program, students, and faculty.

Here are some tips to [make the most of your visit](#):

- Visit the school when class is in session. That way you'll get to see the learning in action and speak with the students when they're not stressed out about finals.
- Take advantage of all visitor options, including a tour, a one-on-one meeting with a student, info sessions, etc.
- Come prepared with [good questions](#) to ask the adcom and to ask students and/or faculty that you may encounter.
- Learn as much about the school *before* you land on campus. You don't want to ask a question that was answered 10 times already on the school's website.
- If you are unable to visit the campus, be sure to [attend info sessions](#) held in your city.

While "good questions" differ b-school to b-school and student to student, the following is a sample of general questions that you can use as a jumping off point for your specific situation:

1. What is a typical day like for a first or second year student?
2. How do professors balance research and teaching?
3. Do professors teach their classes in the larger framework of the interconnectedness of business functions? Do they use an integrated approach? Do they coordinate with other professors?
4. How are interview slots for internships and full-time positions assigned? If there's a bidding process, how does it work?
5. What do you like best here, other than the people?

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6. What would you like to see improved?
7. How helpful is career services? How have they helped you?
8. Have you had any problems getting the classes you want?
9. Who is your favorite professor? What's your favorite extra-curricular activity?

In summary, do your research, take advantage of visitor options, ask good questions, and evaluate your fit with each school.

Ready to Apply?
Get 12 Terrific Tips for MBA Applications

Epilogue

Thank you for downloading this exclusive Accepted.com guide.

You've now learned valuable tips on how to prepare for a smooth-sailing and successful MBA application season.

If you are still not confident about staying on top of the application process, or later on, about writing effective application essays, please [contact Accepted.com](#). While our experienced professional consultants won't write your essays for you, [we can help you](#) from the beginning, as you're defining your topics and themes, or we can [edit your essays](#) to ensure that your application is as strong as it can be.

We can also help you create a timeline for your application, assess your qualifications, and help you set realistic and achievable goals with regards to the application process.

If you have any questions about this guide, or have questions about MBA admissions in general, please feel free to post them to our [Facebook wall](#), [Blog](#), or [LinkedIn group](#). We look forward to hearing from you!

