

APPLYING TO BUSINESS SCHOOL: CHECKLIST FOR APPLYING TO BUSINESS SCHOOL



Submitting applications to the programs you've chosen can sometimes be a complex process. How you prepare your business school application makes all the difference when it comes to getting accepted at your dream school. Read on to learn more about that special combination of timing, self-analysis, honesty, and accuracy that will have admissions officers clamoring to accept you into their programs.

Timing and Deadlines

Most schools--and most business programs--have a filing period for applications of about six to eight months. During this time, the department accepts applications, reviews them, and offers attractive candidates a spot in their program. With such a large window, are you better off applying earlier or later in the cycle?

Most admissions counselors advise that, when it comes to filing your application, earlier is better. In their opinion, an early application has a better chance for admission for several reasons. Most importantly, submitting your application early shows that you are really interested in the program--a surefire way to impress admissions committees.

Although it may not necessarily be the case, if you wait until the last minute to send in your application, it may leave the impression that you see the program as a last resort. If you take it down to the wire, there's also a greater chance that your application will be prepared hastily, something any admissions committee worth its salt is sure to notice--and view negatively. Remember, these people are professionals; they've reviewed thousands of applications over the years, so they'll be sure to recognize it if you've rushed to complete the application. This will not reflect well on your candidacy. As we'll discuss later, the best applications are those that show readers that you have a well-thought-out plan for your future. A rushed application will make you look scattered--and not very serious about the program.

Other good reasons for applying early: At the beginning of the process, there are more spots available. Inevitably, the majority of candidates wait until later on in the admissions window to apply, so as the deadline nears, you'll be competing for the (fewer) remaining spots with a greater number of applicants. Also, at the beginning of the application process, admissions directors have no idea about whom will be applying to the program, so they're not very sure about how selective they can be about admissions. This could work in your favor, since early on, your application will be judged more on its own merit than on how it compares with others.

Staying Organized

Different programs have different deadlines, so you'll need to stay organized throughout the application process. As you receive applications, you may want to file them in separate folders and note the program name and the deadline where you can see it easily. Be sure to note if the program has a rolling deadline, where applications are reviewed as they are received and spots are filled until the program is full, or a firm deadline, where your application must be submitted by a certain date.

To How Many Schools Should You Apply?

The business school application process can be fairly arduous, so you want to be sure that you apply to just the right number of schools. Too few and you may not be accepted to any; too many and you may go crazy filling out all those forms and writing all those essays! Make realistic choices. Look at the criteria of the schools in which you're interested and at your qualifications, and be honest with yourself. By all means, don't rule out your dream program if your GMAT is 10 points below their stated cutoff; but if your GMAT is 50 points below the cutoff, your GPA is a point below their cutoff, and you don't have any real work experience, you might want to save yourself the effort.

You may want to place the schools that you've chosen into three categories--reach schools, probable schools, and safety schools--and then go from there. Apply to a few reach schools (those that are longshots based on your academic record and other application materials), send more applications to probable schools (those to which you have a reasonable, realistic, and better-than-average chance of getting admitted), and send a few applications to your safety schools (those where you're sure you'll be accepted). Generally, safety schools won't be your first choices, but you may need to rely on them if you don't get accepted at your reach and probable schools. Don't, however, apply to any school that you wouldn't attend happily.

How Do Business Schools Pick Students?

When business schools review applications, they do not follow a magical formula, where GMAT + GPA + Work Experience + Personal Statement = Admissions. Most schools are looking to enroll an ideal community of students who will work well together in the program and benefit from the program's goals, so not just the straight-A students with high GMAT scores will be offered admission. Globalization in the field of business itself means that programs are looking for a more diverse student body that includes older students, women, minorities, international students, and students from small schools, big schools, Ivy League schools, and so on. This might all sound a little nebulous, but admissions directors want to enroll students that will be a good fit with their program, and every program has a different definition of what that good fit will be, based on a mix of professional, academic, and personal interests. If you've done your homework and are applying to those programs that you've determined will fulfill your career and personal goals, you're off to the right start. In other words, don't be discouraged from applying to a program that you feel is perfect for you just because your GMAT score falls slightly below their stated requirement. If all the other elements of your application show that you will be a valuable member of their team, your chances for admission will be favorable. By the same token, if you're an older applicant (more than 32 years old), you may feel that your chances for admission are lower because you do not represent the "typical" graduate student. On the contrary, in business school, older students are seen as offering professional experience, maturity, and real-world perspective--all highly valued in the business world.

The Elements of an Application

Form and Fee

When filling out your application, whatever form it takes, remember that accuracy and neatness count. If you must handwrite it (and you should try at all costs to avoid this), make sure that your handwriting is legible. If you type your application, check and double-check for typos, errors of alignment, and other potentially embarrassing gaffs. You don't want to start off on the wrong foot with the admissions committee. You may want to photocopy the blank form several times and fill out a few drafts before you complete the copy that you'll submit. Before you send off the application, make a copy for your own records. Remember the fee. Ridiculous as it seems, every year admissions committees receive lovingly prepared applications--presented in beautiful folders or

professionally bound--from well-meaning applicants who've forgotten to include the rest of the application is prepared, this oversight simply doesn't look good.

Test Scores

Most business schools (but not all) require that prospective applicants submit scores from standardized tests, most often the GMAT, and the TOEFL, if you're an international student. When you take these tests, you'll be able to pick which schools you'd like your scores to be sent to; if you decide later on that you'd like your scores submitted to other schools, you'll need to make the proper arrangements to get them there.

Transcripts and Resume

You'll need to provide each program with a copy of your academic transcript from every school that you've attended. Don't forget to include transcripts from summer school programs, graduate work, or any classes you have taken since graduation. Allow at least a month to receive your transcript, and be ready to pay for each copy. Review your transcripts carefully to make sure that there are no mistakes, and remember to keep a copy for yourself.

Some programs will also ask you to include your resume or curriculum vitae (CV) as a summary of your work history. If you haven't updated your resume or CV lately, take the time to do so now. Include information about articles you have published or papers you have presented, volunteer work, and memberships and positions in professional societies. Have someone else review it for accuracy and spelling. Your resume or CV should highlight your accomplishments, responsibilities, and career progression, if applicable. If possible, show evidence of managerial and leadership skills while portraying yourself as a team player.

Letters of Recommendation

Most business programs will require you to submit two or three letters of recommendation from your present employer or professors. If you're not comfortable asking these people, you can submit recommendations from a co-worker, a former boss, or someone else who can vouch for the quality of your work. When requesting recommendations, be sure to provide the recommendation writers with a summary of your accomplishments--perhaps your resume or academic transcripts--as well as some details about which programs you're applying to and the criteria by which you'll be judged. Supply them with labeled envelopes so they can seal the recommendations upon completing them. Give your recommendation writers plenty of time to write recommendations, as much as two or three months. Check in with them a month before the recommendations are due, and collect the recommendations from them yourselves; don't make them go to the trouble of mailing them for you.

Essays

By and large, all business programs ask candidates to respond to essay questions. The number varies from program to program; some ask candidates to provide just one personal statement that discusses their past and their goals, while others require candidates to respond to as many as five or more essay questions on separate topics. We'll walk you through essay questions in more depth later on in this article, but in general, admissions committees are looking for you to show them why you want to be admitted to their particular program, review your personal background and goals for the future, describe your accomplishments (and failures) and how they shaped you, and discuss activities that you enjoy outside of work and school.

Obviously, with some of these elements, you won't be able to exercise much control. The information you include on the form is basic general information about you--your stats, so to speak. Your transcripts and test scores, too, are what they are. You can't go back and change the grades you got in college (wouldn't it be great if we could do that?) or the scores you got on the GMAT (although you can take the test a few times, chances are that you won't improve your score that significantly with each try). How, then, can you show the admissions committees who you really are--the brilliant person behind the so-so GPA from that little-known college in rural Pennsylvania? With your recommendations and your essays, that's how. You have total control over these elements. By choosing the perfect people to toot your horn and by doing some tooting of your own, you can turn an average application into an outstanding one and swing those admissions committees in your favor.

What Your Applications Should Show about You

Academic Profile

Business programs want to admit those who can survive the rigors of their program. For this reason, they look at your undergraduate GPA, which reflects classroom achievement, and your GMAT score, which is an indicator of your aptitude. As we've said before, however, having a high GPA and GMAT score don't necessarily guarantee admission, nor does a lower GPA or GMAT score take you out of the picture. When reviewing your transcript, admissions committees will look not only at your overall GPA but also at the progression of your grades and the kinds of courses you took as an undergraduate. Did you work hard to improve your grades after a slow start--or did you lose steam in your final years? Did you take advanced courses as electives--or did you fill your spare classes with easy introductory courses to beef up your GPA? Admissions committees will take note of this. They will also look to see if you've had any notable academic achievements or won any awards as an undergraduate or in the workplace. If this is the case, be sure that it's reflected on your application--if not in your transcripts, then in your essay, letters of recommendation, or resume.

Your undergraduate degree will have little effect on your chances for admission to most business schools, so don't think that your B.A. in English literature will be a hindrance. Remember that most M.B.A. programs offer or even require a core curriculum of basic business courses as part of the degree. However, you should, as we've discussed before, be able to show that you have general skills in economics, calculus, and statistics. If you didn't take these courses as an undergraduate, show on your application that you are planning to do so before being admitted to the program.

Personal Qualities

Admissions committees want to see that you are a clear-headed individual who has taken the time to think about your future and your goals. For that reason, make sure that your application is consistent throughout--in what you're trying to say about yourself and your plans for the future. You'll be judged less favorably if you don't show a clear purpose or if you jump from idea to idea.

Along those lines, your application is a direct reflection of your ability to communicate with others--think of it as a high-level sales pitch. Communication skills are essential for business leaders. As Brian Walker, Assistant Director of Admissions at Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Management at Rice University in Houston, notes, "You can be smart and motivated and come up with the greatest strategies, but if you can't get them across to customers or to upper management, your ideas are worthless." Your application is your only chance to show admissions committees how well you can communicate; this makes the essays especially important.

Your application should show that you have the motivation and commitment to complete graduate work in business. Business programs are also looking for leaders who are capable of working as part of a team, so you'll need to show on your application that you have the right combination of initiative, ability to follow instructions, and capacity to work well with others.

Work Experience

The large majority of business programs want to see that you have a few years of solid work experience. In business school, you'll be called upon to contribute to class discussions and projects in meaningful ways, and work experience will provide a context for your interpretation of what you'll learn in the classroom. When reviewing your application, business schools will want to see not only where you worked, but also what you did while you were there. Did you move up? Did you take initiative? How did your contributions to the companies you worked for make you invaluable to them? Obviously, if you rose up over the years from the mail room to the board room, this will show admissions committees that you've got what it takes to succeed not only in business but also in your program--initiative, drive, energy, and dedication. Committees also want to know about your membership in professional organizations and your positions within these organizations and about research you've done in the field. All of this will paint a clear picture of you as a worker and, by extension, as a student.

Organization/Presentation

When you enter the world of business, you'll be called upon to present your ideas and the ideas of your company. How well you present yourself in your application will be an indication of how well you'll do at this task. Are you thorough? Did you supply the requested materials and the proper fee? Is everything spelled correctly? Check and double-check all the materials to make sure you haven't inadvertently sent the materials for another school. This is a huge mistake that will put a giant black mark on your application. Thoroughness and accuracy are key.

The Essays

Business schools put a lot of stock in the quality of the essays that they receive from their applicants. Admissions committees count on essays to show them the real you, beyond the numbers and stats shown in the other elements of your application. In your essay, you show why you're serious about getting an advanced degree in business, exhibit what you can contribute to a particular program, and elaborate on what you've achieved on a personal, professional, and academic level. It's also the perfect opportunity to demonstrate that you are a clear thinker and that you can express yourself well. While essays are just a part of the overall admissions process, stellar essays can propel an otherwise average application into the "accept" pile, and poorly written essays may drop you to the bottom of the list.

Before You Begin

Even before you begin to write your essays, you should have a clear understanding of where you've been and where you're going. And not just in your professional life, either. How have your experiences--all of them, personal and professional--shaped you into the person that you are? And how does that relate to the course of study and profession you are choosing to pursue? This is what the admissions committees want to know. So before you begin writing your essays, take stock of your background, your experiences, your abilities, and your goals. In each of these four areas, think about not just your professional experience but about your academic accomplishments and personal life as well. Keep in mind, doing a self-assessment helps you understand how your background led you to apply to business school--a must-have piece of information that will tell admissions committees why you want to and should attend their program. If you don't know how to begin, the following questions will get you thinking about where you've been and where you're going:

- What were my strongest subjects as an undergraduate? How did my academic experiences influence my choice of major and my decision to return to business school?
- When did my interest in the profession that I hope to enter after leaving business school first develop?
- What do I want to be doing in five years?
- What are my favorite extracurricular activities? Why do these mean so much to me?

Sample Business School Essay Topics

- Describe the progression of your career to date. Why are you seeking a business degree at this point?
- What are your career goals? How will an advanced degree in business help you achieve these goals?
- Why do you want to obtain your degree from our particular program?
- How has your background, experiences, and education influenced the person you are today?
- In reviewing the last five years, describe one or two accomplishments in which you demonstrated leadership.
- Discuss a nonacademic personal failure. In what way were you disappointed in yourself? What did you learn from the experience?
- Discuss your involvement in a community or extracurricular organization. Include an explanation of how you became involved in the organization and how you help(ed) the organization meet its goals.

So remember this when you're applying: at most schools, no single factor will count more than any other. As the old saying goes, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," and that's especially true in business school applications. Your tests scores, GPA, work experience, essays, and recommendations put together create a complete picture of your interests, strengths, and accolades. Weaknesses are overshadowed easily by strengths in other areas, so be sure to show off those strengths.

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