

The  
**ULTIMATE**  
Guide to the  
**MBA**  
Admissions  
Process



# INTRODUCTION

Like any graduate education, the process of earning a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree is a fundamentally transformative experience. After study, immersion, and collaboration, students walk away with a strong foundation of knowledge, an expanded network of friends and colleagues, and a greater understanding of the business world and their place in it.

The application cycle for MBA programs can feel like a world all its own. The process—from inquiry to test preparation, MBA fairs to networking—exposes the true scope of global business education. It can be intimidating to consider that at any given application deadline, tens of thousands of candidates around the world are submitting applications at their schools of choice.

Fortunately for candidates, the application process is similar across many business schools, and there are resources available to help guide you through every aspect of the application. The Vanderbilt Business Recruiting and Admissions team has compiled a set of recommendations for students applying to any MBA program. In the following guide, we present a series of how-to's, best practices, and FAQs concerning the most common features of b-school applications.

We hope you can take away something valuable from this guide. Best of luck on your MBA journey!

## CONTENTS

Application Timeline.....	2
Rec Letters.....	4
Written Essays.....	6
Video Essays.....	8
Admissions Interview.....	10
Conclusion.....	13

# APPLICATION TIMELINE

## 1 First Stop



### **START BY DETERMINING YOUR PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GOALS.**

Then identify potential actions you can take to achieve your goals. Talk to people who have reached similar career goals, and learn how an MBA factored into their success. Research the degree and the types of careers you can pursue after earning it.

## 2 Second Stop



### **START RESEARCHING SCHOOLS AND STANDARDIZED TESTING OPTIONS.**

Some prospective students begin with a school search. Others start preparing to take either the GMAT or GRE (the two most common standardized tests for business schools) then assess schools based on their score. Either way, take plenty of time to prepare for the test, and don't settle for a mediocre score when you can do better.

## 3 Third Stop



**START STUDYING.** The longer you have been out of undergraduate, the more time you should allot for test preparation. Some candidates take the GMAT or GRE as early as a year before they want to begin school, so you should consider starting test prep more than a year before your expected enrollment year. You should expect that at minimum, it will take at least six months of study time before you'll feel truly ready to take the GMAT or GRE.

## 4 Fourth Stop



**IF NECESSARY, RE-TAKE THE GMAT OR GRE.** The more lead time you give yourself, the easier it will be to re-take the test if you're not satisfied with your original score. Ideally, you should take the GMAT or GRE a year before your anticipated start date. Check the testing schedules for GMAT or GRE to ensure the timing works for you.

## 5 Fifth Stop



**BEGIN THE APPLICATION PROCESS.** Once you've identified your top choices and backups, consider the deadlines. Application deadlines for the first and second rounds normally fall somewhere in late October and early January, respectively. Final-round deadlines fall somewhere in late April/early May. Some schools wrap up the entire process in late winter, so look carefully at your prospective schools' application timelines and note the date by which you must make your decision. Not all schools will extend your response date while you wait on an answer from another school.

## Sixth Stop



**SELECT YOUR APPLICATION ROUND(S).** In terms of available spots, all of the application rounds are generally equivalent, with the exception of the last round, when classes are mostly filled and the process gets more competitive. If you're looking for scholarships, apply in the early rounds when the scholarship pot is larger. With that said, make sure your test score is competitive at any school you're applying to—and if your top schools give decisions later in the application cycle, apply to your backup schools later as well.

## Seventh Stop



**COMPLETE THE APPLICATION PROCESS.** Test scores and recommendation letters are the two pieces of any application that take the longest to get together, so as you study for the GMAT or GRE identify people who can provide rec letters.

## Eighth Stop



**CONSIDER A VISIT TO YOUR TOP SCHOOLS.** Campus visits can help you determine whether the school is the right fit for you, demonstrate your interest to the admissions team, and often coincide with interviews. Keep in mind that some schools require an on-campus interview so budget enough time in your process for a visit, should it be necessary. If you are unable to visit campus, ask the school if they offer virtual visits so that you can get a better feel for the school's culture and campus environment.

## Ninth Stop



**MAKE THE DECISION.** Once you've received your acceptances, weigh all of the factors and enroll in the best option for you. Congratulations, you're headed back to school in the fall!

## Tenth Stop



**PREPARE FOR THE TRANSITION.** Determine the proper timing to give your employer notice—much of this will depend on your role, your company and other considerations unique to your position. Start planning for any move that may be required, and identify how early you'd like to relocate before school starts. Pay attention to the school's "To-Do" list (you will probably need immunizations, for instance), and fill in any knowledge gaps through online course work or classes at local colleges, to give yourself a leg-up when classes begin.

# REC LETTERS

Prospective Student  
401 21st Avenue South  
Nashville, TN 37203

Dear Prospective Student,

Recommendation letters are an important component of the business school application, since they're a chance for someone who knows you very well to speak to your strengths and relevant capabilities. Recommendation letters demonstrate that your mentors and supervisors believe in your ability to succeed, both in business school and in your career after graduation. Here's what you should know before asking someone for a recommendation letter:

## **GIVE YOURSELF PLENTY OF TIME.**

Other than taking the GMAT or GRE and waiting for your scores, recommendation letters often take the longest time to coordinate out of all the application components. Your first-choice recommenders may be traveling or busy with work, or they may even forget about the recommendation letter deadline. Don't let it get down to the wire, and give both yourself and your recommenders plenty of lead time before the application deadline.

## **FOCUS ON PROFESSIONAL REFERENCES.**

Yes, you're applying to business school, but the admissions committee doesn't want to see references from the college professor you had for that one class seven years ago. They want recent references from people who know you well in a professional context—so, individuals you have worked with closely in the past several years. And the longer you've worked with them, the better, as those recommenders will be able to speak to how you've improved and matured as a professional over time.

## **CHOOSE YOUR RECOMMENDERS WISELY.**

In general, recruiting managers would rather see an in-depth, praise-filled recommendation from your direct manager than a vague, tersely worded letter from the president of your company, even if the first person's title is less impressive. You should choose recommenders who can speak in detail about your past work experience and with whom you have a positive relationship.

### **DON'T ASK FAMILY MEMBERS.**

That is, unless you work at a family business. In that case, it's absolutely fine to get one recommendation letter from a relative, especially if you report directly to him or her. If a family member is one of your recommenders, make sure your other letter is from someone who isn't related to you—perhaps a client or a mentor. If you don't work with your relatives, then steer clear of asking family members for a recommendation and focus on professional relationships instead.

### **HAVE A PLAN IF YOU CAN'T ASK YOUR SUPERVISOR.**

Obviously, a current supervisor is the ideal person to ask for a recommendation letter. However, recruiting managers know that you might not be able to ask your current supervisor for a recommendation in case it jeopardizes your job. If you can't ask your current supervisor, consider who else has overseen your past or present work. A previous supervisor, an indirect manager, a client and a member of your board of directors are all good alternative candidates to ask.

### **MAKE IT EASY ON YOUR RECOMMENDERS.**

In addition to your resume, you'll want to provide your recommenders with some themes or talking points that you touch on in your application essays. You'll also want to let your recommenders know which schools you're applying to and any special requirements they have (for example, some schools require an evaluation grid in addition to the letters). Don't forget to include deadlines and instructions for submitting the recommendation letters and evaluations.

### **KNOW THE SCHOOL'S POLICY ON SUPPLEMENTARY LETTERS.**

Most schools require two letters, but some students like to send in a third supplementary letter, thinking it gives them an advantage in the application process. However, when it comes to recommendation letters, more isn't always better. Some committees are willing to review these additional letters, while others won't add them to your file and will even throw them away unread. Before asking a third recommender to write you a letter, check with your recruiting manager on the school's policy regarding supplementary letters.

Yours,

Ultimate MBA Guide

# WRITTEN ESSAYS

## 10 DO's DON'Ts

Admissions teams read hundreds, if not thousands, of essays during the recruiting cycle. If you want to stand out (for the right reasons), consider this helpful list of do's and don'ts.

Aspiring business school students spend a lot of time on their applications proving why they're a strong candidate: grades, test scores, work experience, etc. The essay is a golden opportunity for applicants to convey other important "why's": why they want an MBA, why they're a good fit for a particular school, and why their skills will

translate into an MBA-level career. Different schools will ask different essay questions, but at its core, the essay is a personal statement. Use the opportunity to describe your current role, detail your career aspirations, and explain why an MBA from the program you're applying to will help you achieve them.

1

### **DO: Talk about transferable skills.**

For career switchers and promotion seekers alike, it's important to promote the abilities you've developed and describe why they'll be useful in your post-MBA role. Recruiting managers use the essay and other parts of your application to gauge your viability as a job candidate, so make sure you clearly demonstrate it in the essay.

2

### **DON'T: Cut and paste from the school's website.**

Candidates applying to multiple schools may be looking for quick-and-easy ways to express interest in a particular program. Stuffing essays with names of professors and classes is a transparent way of simulating interest, and recruiting officers are wise to the game.

3

### **DO: Make sure you've answered the question.**

While most essays are personal statements at their core, schools often do require multiple essays on particular subjects. To ensure you've properly addressed each question, have someone else read the essay, then ask them what they think the question is. This is doubly important for scholarship-related essays, which tend to ask more specific questions.

4

**DO: Enlist the help of strangers (or acquaintances).**

The best way to measure the impact of your essay is to have someone you don't know review it. "I always tell candidates to have someone they've never met before read their essays, because that's essentially what's happening here," says Bailey McChesney, Senior Associate Director of MBA Admissions, Vanderbilt Business.

5

**DON'T: Enlist the wrong kind of help from others.**

Admissions officers compare essays to the written portion of a candidate's entrance exam, and any discrepancies will be flagged. You can and should get others to read your essay and provide feedback, but do all of the writing and editing yourself.

6

**DO: Take advantage of the optional essays.**

If you're interested in certain scholarships, schools may require an additional essay. Beyond that, optional essays can offer applicants the opportunity to explain low GPAs, job gaps, why they aren't asking their employers for a recommendation, and other potential flags. Getting ahead of these questions will strengthen your application and demonstrate your self-awareness. At the same time, if there's nothing that you think needs to be explained, refrain from writing one. "Don't feel compelled to respond to an essay just because you think more words are better," says Rob Schickler, Associate Director of Recruiting and Admissions, Vanderbilt Business.

One caveat: Don't use the optional essay to explain how the GMAT or GRE isn't an accurate measure of your quantitative skills. It comes across poorly, and it can unintentionally call the abilities of the admissions team into question.

7

**DON'T: Go over the word limit.**

Admissions teams read hundreds or thousands of essays a year. Adding work to their plate is not a way to get into their good graces.

8

**DO: Make sure the name of the school is correct.**

Reusing content from other applications may be a way to save time or more effectively structure your thoughts, but using the wrong school name is the most cringe-worthy of errors an applicant can make. "Find/Replace" is your friend.

9

**DON'T: Quote famous people.**

You have a limited amount of words, so make sure to make them count. "Focus your essay on your words, not the words of others," suggests Sue Oldham, Associate Dean of MBA Operations, Vanderbilt Business.

10

**DO: Be realistic about your goals.**

Lofty career aspirations are always welcome, and they can underscore your passions and personal interests, but taking a pragmatic approach to your goals shows you understand the landscape and, potentially, how to operate within it.



# VIDEO ESSAYS

**Many business schools are including video essays as either mandatory or optional components of their applications.**

The video essay gives you a chance to show how you perform extemporaneously; it also adds a visual element to your file, allowing recruiting managers to put faces with names. Here's everything you need to know about the newest addition to the business school application.

“There is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answer with the video essay. These are questions that you really can’t prepare for. This is a chance to show your personality. Relax and be yourself!”

**Mckenzie Mulligan,**  
**Associate Director,**  
**Recruiting and Admissions,**  
**Vanderbilt Business**

## GETTING TO KNOW THE FORMAT

First, the video essay program will prompt you to test your webcam to ensure that everything is in working order. Then you'll move on to choosing a question. Video essay questions are served randomly to candidates from a bank chosen by the school. The questions are usually more lighthearted and designed to showcase the applicant's personality. (For example, "What would you cook for dinner if you were having your future in-laws over?")

If you don't like the first question, you'll probably be given several more options; if you don't choose one, you'll be locked into the last option. Once you've chosen a question, you'll be given a short amount of time (such as 60 seconds) to prepare, which will not be recorded. You'll then be given up to 90 seconds to record your answer to the question. You don't have to use the full time and can stop the recording early if you feel like you've finished your answer.



## PRACTICING FOR THE VIDEO

There's no way to prepare for the specific questions you'll be asked (that's kind of the point of a video essay), but you can work to become more comfortable in front of the camera. Recording yourself can be a little bit awkward, so many candidates find it helpful to videotape themselves answering random questions before sitting down for the official video essay. This practice helps you get used to the video essay format and gives you a chance to work through any technical challenges. Playing back the video can also reveal any tics or mannerisms you need to improve, such as saying "um" a lot or not looking at the camera.



## PREPARING THE ROOM

Video essays are intended to be unrehearsed, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't prepare for them. Just as you would for any video interview, make sure the room you're recording in is clean, with no distracting messes. Choose a space with a plain background and minimal ambient noise. Let any roommates or family members know you're about to record a video essay so you won't be interrupted, and if you have pets, make sure they're contained and quiet.



## ACING THE VIDEO ESSAY



This essay is part of your application, so be sure to dress professionally and give your best impression when you're ready to record. Try to speak a little bit more slowly than you would otherwise; many people get nervous during video essays and tend to speed up their speaking rate, so watch out for this. If it helps you to write things down, keep a pen and paper handy to jot down a couple of notes during the preparation time. Above all, try not to overthink it—the essays are intended to be a fun way to show the admissions committee who you really are.

The video is your opportunity to shine. Be yourself and take your time. We are looking to get a sense of how you'd be in front of a potential employer, but it should be fun.

# ADMISSIONS INTERVIEW

While the application itself is very important, admissions interviews add a face-to-face, interpersonal component that can't be captured on paper. The interview is a chance for you to show who you are and see if you connect with the interviewer (and by proxy, the school itself). Interviewers are looking to see how you interact with others and if you're aware of your professional strengths and weaknesses.

“The interview provides the best opportunity to bring your application to life and gives you the chance to showcase your personality in a face to face interaction. **Kim Killingsworth, Director of International Recruiting and Relations, Vanderbilt Business**”

## Q What kinds of questions should I be prepared to answer?

**Specific questions vary from school to school** and interviewer to interviewer. In general, you need to be ready to walk interviewers through your resume and explain how your past work experience fits with your future aspirations. You don't need to have an exact career plan mapped out, but you should have a professional focus (such as consulting or finance), and you should be able to articulate why you want to go to business school and how an MBA will help you reach your professional goals. Even if you're looking to switch careers, mention any transferable skills you have from your old job—teamwork, leadership, management, communication, etc.—that will help you launch your new career. If you have any inconsistencies on your resume, such as job-hopping or a gap in employment, be prepared to discuss them as well.

## Q Do interviewers read my application beforehand?

**It depends on the school.** At Vanderbilt Business, most interviews are conducted by current students who have not reviewed your resume or application, which starts the interview with a relatively clean slate—so don't be afraid to “repeat” something you said in your application. However, interviewers at some other schools might read the full application before the interview. Your recruiting manager will be able to advise you on what to expect.

“The interview is a conversation not an interrogation. Be prepared to share your unique story. **Sue Oldham, Associate Dean of MBA Operations, Vanderbilt Business**”

## Q Who will conduct the interview?

**Again, this depends on the business school.** At some universities, admissions interviews are only conducted by the recruiting manager, while some schools enlist alumni or current students to conduct interviews. You'll usually know ahead of time who's going to interview you, but come prepared with the knowledge that you might not be talking with a recruiting manager at every school. "At Vanderbilt Business your interviewer will most likely be a 2nd year student, and no one knows our MBA program quite like they do. Take advantage of their experience. Ask questions. Be engaged. Prove to them why you deserve to be in their shoes," advises Colleen Pagnani, Recruiting and Admissions Coordinator, Dual Degree Recruiter, Vanderbilt Business.

## Q What are possible interview formats?

**Usually, you can interview in person** (on campus or at a career fair) or virtually via a video call. The possible interview formats vary, and some programs give preference to certain options (for example, an in-person, on-campus interview might "count" for more than a video interview in the admissions process); Vanderbilt's MBA admissions team weighs all three options equally. Check with your recruiting manager to see if the school has a preferred interview format. You'll normally only have one interview per school, though some have additional rounds.

## Q How can I practice?

**It takes work to walk an interviewer through** an example of your professional behavior in 3-5 minutes. Many candidates find it helpful to outline answers to common questions using the [S.T.A.R. method](#) (situation, task, action, result) and then practice until they can answer succinctly in just a couple of minutes. Many applicants also like doing mock interviews with other people—a fellow applicant, spouse, roommate, or friend.

## Q How should I dress for it?

**When it comes to clothing**, treat an admissions interview like a job interview and keep it professional: “While you should feel free to express your personality through your attire, it’s typically better to err on the side of overdressing rather than underdressing,” says Ashley Lomax, Assistant Director of Recruiting and Admissions, Lead Diversity Recruiter, Vanderbilt Business. Some candidates usually wear a blazer and tie, while others may wear a dress or a nice shirt with dress pants or a skirt. And if you’re doing a video interview, be sure to wear full-body professional wear in case you have to stand up in the middle of a call—basketball shorts or pajama bottoms do not pair well with a fancy blazer.

## Q What kinds of questions can I ask the interviewer?

**Usually, the interviewer will leave time at the end** to answer any questions you might have about the program. This is a great chance to display your knowledge of the school; it’s a big red flag if you haven’t done any research and don’t know anything about the program. You can ask questions about specific professors or classes, as well as how to get involved in particular clubs, trips, or interview opportunities. If you’re not familiar with the city, you can also ask what it’s like living in the area.

## Q Any special tips for video interviews?

**Definitely test your equipment beforehand** to make sure your webcam and internet connection are working. Set up in a clean room with a plain background so there’s nothing that will distract the interviewer during the call. Make sure the door is locked so no one comes in, and notify any roommates or family members that you have an interview happening. If you have any pets at home, make sure they won’t barge in or start making noise during the call. Finally, if you have any connectivity or technical issues during your call, keep cool. The interviewer will be watching to see how you handle the frustration.

# CONCLUSION

Thank you for reading our guide! We hope you learned a few things you didn't know about the application process. At the very least, we hope you'll continue down the path with more confidence in your prospects as an MBA candidate. The journey can feel long and challenging at times, but it's well worth the time and effort.

If you have any additional questions about the MBA application process, at Vanderbilt or elsewhere, you can always contact the Vanderbilt MBA Recruiting and Admissions team at [mba@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:mba@vanderbilt.edu), or reach out directly to one of the recruiting managers below.

Thank you again, and good luck!

## Vanderbilt MBA Recruiting and Admissions Team

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