



MBA Admissions

Direct from the Director

APPLICATION TIPS

This document has a collection of posts from the Direct From the Director blog that were published between July 13, 2018 - August 21, 2018.

The following application sections are covered in this document:

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

ESSAY

RECOMMENDATIONS

TESTS & TRANSCRIPTS

EXTRACURRICULARS & AWARDS

RESUME/CV

This is not meant to give comprehensive advice, but we hope the tips are helpful.



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Employment History

I am starting with the Employment section because I think there's a temptation to just "go through the motions" in this part of the app—maybe because it feels similar to your resume? If you do that, you're missing an opportunity to bring us into your world. In addition to dates and titles for your most recent three jobs, we give you five open text boxes:

- Your Role and Responsibilities
- Company/Organization Description
- Reason for Leaving [for a new role]
- Key Accomplishments
- Most Significant Challenge

You only have 250 characters for each box, but you would be surprised how much you can express in that space.

In your own words (rather than the description in your HR job posting) what is your job? In describing Your Role and Responsibilities, what has stood out as critical to you as well as to your company?

In describing your Company/Organization, keep in mind that while we are familiar with many companies around the world, we may not know much about your division or your team. If you work at a startup or your family business, giving us details beyond what is available online is also very helpful.

As for your Reason for Leaving, this can be simple and straightforward and hopefully gives you a chance to reflect on the "why" of a key transition in your work life.

In the Key Accomplishments box, think back on your time at this company—what achievement has been most meaningful to you? Try to be as specific and as honest as possible. The same goes for your Most Significant Challenge.

The employment history section ought to be one of the more self-reflective parts of the application as you step back and take stock of your journey so far. Don't be afraid to show a little personality in your responses! This employment section really helps us get to know you and is often a good jumping off point for the interview stage of the process.

Hopefully this is helpful to you. If you haven't started your application yet, I encourage you to start one now. I'll share some thoughts about the essay next week!



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Essay

Let me start by reminding you of the prompt:

“As we review your application, what more would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy for the Harvard Business School MBA program?”

The first thing you should know about the essay is that we consider all the elements of the application to get to know you and never look at just one piece by itself. The essay isn't more or less important than other elements of the application. If you've been stressed about the essay, hopefully this releases a little anxiety.

Two of the most important words in the prompt are: “what more?” The most helpful essays build on the rest of the written application or share new information. It's hard to say “what more” you'd like us to know if you haven't already filled out the rest of the application (or at least thought about what you'd like to say). The essay should help you bring all the aspects of your application together.

We've had the same prompt for a few years now, and we like the freedom it gives you. Students who are currently at HBS have taken many (many!) different approaches to this essay and were successful in the application process. There are too many approaches to list, and if I started giving a few examples, you may feel like you had to take one of those approaches. You don't.

Instead let me share some approaches that are NOT particularly helpful to your application:

- **Essays that are basically a paragraph version of your resume:** This is surprisingly common: I went to college X then decided to take job Y and that led me to job Z, and now I'm applying to HBS. There's nothing “wrong” with this essay per se; it just doesn't add much to your application because we already know all of that from the other elements of your application. Of course you can build on things that are raised in other parts of the application—just make sure it's additive.
- **Essays that are too long:** I wish I could give you a general rule that essays over X words are too long, but sometimes you need more space to bring things together. And that's the reason there's no word limit. Use your best judgment, and try to be clear and concise in your writing. What do we need to know to understand you that hasn't been addressed elsewhere? (And what don't we need to know?)
- **Essays that aren't about you:** I know this sounds obvious. I like the advice I heard an HBS alum give recently: After you've written your essay, ask yourself, “Could this essay also describe someone else?” If so, it probably isn't personal enough to add to your overall application, and you likely need to do some more introspection. For example, we occasionally receive essays that talk at great length about HBS or an element of the program like the case method, but only share a tiny bit about the person themselves. That's a missed opportunity to bring us into your world, your decisions, your motivations or your formative experiences.

Final thought: I know from personal experience it's tempting to write, rewrite and rewrite again. Be careful in all that polishing that you don't “shine away” your personality. And, remember, the essay is just one element that we consider in the context of the overall application. Good luck!



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Recommendations

We get a lot of specific questions about the letters of recommendation, so let me try this post Q&A style.

What questions will you ask my recommender about me?

1. How do the candidate's performance, potential, background, or personal qualities compare to those of other well-qualified individuals in similar roles? Please provide specific examples.
2. Please describe the most important piece of constructive feedback you have given the applicant. Please detail the circumstances and the applicant's response.

Who should I ask to write my letters of recommendation?

Ask people who know you well in a work context. In most cases, one of the two should be your direct supervisor. The other can be someone you've worked with in the past or you are working with in a different capacity now. Depending on where you're working, you can also consider a client, an investor or someone from a partner organization. Recs from professors are typically not as helpful in our process unless you've worked with them in a significant way.

It is a good idea to think about how the two recommendations can complement one another by drawing on different examples or aspects of your background.

What if I am not telling my employer that I am applying to business school?

We understand, and we do not want your situation at work (promotions, bonus, etc.) to be negatively affected. If you're in this situation you can ask someone from a prior job, or someone that you work with outside of your organization to write for you.

Does it matter if my recommender is an alumna/alumnus of HBS? How important is her/his title?

We get this question all the time, and you should always choose people who know you well over someone who may be an HBS alum or have a big title. Remember, we are trying to get to know YOU, not your recommender.

What are the logistics?

You will fill out your recommenders' names and email addresses within the application. This will prompt the system to send the online form to them directly. They will submit their recommendations separately from you, and it is your responsibility to follow-up to ensure they are submitted on time.

What guidance (if any) should I give my recommender?

It is fine to share with your recommenders drafts of your application and essay and discuss with them areas where you think their perspective can help round out your story.

It is NOT ok to draft letters of recommendation or any portion of them for your recommender.

Can I send in additional letters of recommendation or support?

No. And please don't encourage people to write in on your behalf. It is not helpful. Throughout the entire application process, we aim to be as thoughtful, fair, and consistent as possible. We review two letters of recommendation for each applicant.



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Recommendations (continued)

What makes for a great recommendation?

Rather than general platitudes, the best recommendations provide specific examples. That helps us understand the impact you have had and how you get things done. How are the people and the places in your world better because you were there? And, just as important, recommenders should be forthright about the feedback they've shared—we are all working on getting better at something and your recommenders' perspectives on your growth help us understand your journey and your potential.



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Tests and Transcripts

One of the biggest misconceptions about applying to HBS is that admissions decisions are based largely on your GMAT or GRE score. That is not how it works. We consider every element of your application to get to know you as a whole person, and we know that you are more than a standardized test score!

So why do we require a standardized test at all? In the case method at HBS, students think on their feet, debate with classmates, and analyze complex situations. The classroom is very engaging and fast-paced, and I think you'll love it. A standardized test gives us one indication of your verbal and quantitative agility—important for thriving in the HBS MBA program and the case method.

We are agnostic about the GMAT or the GRE—really. (Really!) Take whichever one suits you best. In the admitted Class of 2019, 12% of students submitted the GRE. In the incoming Class of 2020, 14% of students submitted the GRE.

You can see from the Class Profile that we admit students with a wide range of standardized test scores. While a higher score will never hurt you, it's not a guarantee to be admitted either. And some of the admitted students who have the biggest impact while at HBS and beyond didn't have the highest test scores. We're looking to craft a Class of diverse thinkers and leaders who will make a difference in the world, and that goes well beyond a test score. We always keep that in mind as we get to know you through the whole application and make our decisions.

To get at academic readiness, we also look to your transcripts, GPA, letters of recommendation, and the rigor of your work experience. The transcripts should be one of the easiest parts of the application since your undergrad degree is already behind you by the time you apply. Just upload your unofficial transcript (no need to convert or translate anything), and we'll take it from there. We look through your classes, major(s), grades, and your journey through your degree(s).

In conclusion, let me just reiterate that test scores and transcripts are two important parts of the application but they are not more important than any other element. I hope this post is helpful to you!



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Extracurriculars and Awards

Extracurricular activities: What are you involved in outside of work? What impact did these activities have on you, and what impact did you have through these activities?

Sometimes future applicants wonder what activities they should participate in so they will “look good” when they apply. While I understand this means they are really interested in HBS, this approach to extracurriculars doesn’t usually help an application. Here’s why: if you do things because it might look good to someone else, you naturally won’t be as dedicated or learn as much, and your impact will be smaller. You’re busy, and it’s likely that “going through the motions” with an activity is going to feel superficial to us on the Admissions Board—and worse, it will feel superficial to you.

Besides, there is no one extracurricular experience that we look for—we want to build a class of diverse and authentic leaders.

My advice, instead, is to pursue things that are meaningful or exciting to you. Do them well, with energy and, yes, with passion. You’ll learn a lot more, likely have more impact and probably enjoy yourself too! Many strong applicants have “common” extracurriculars, but they pursue them with uncommon purpose or persistence. That kind of approach bodes well for the impact you can have at HBS and beyond, and it will come through naturally in your application and in your interview.

Of course, we recognize that many of you are very busy with work and/or family commitments. We give you space to list three extracurricular activities, but don’t worry if you don’t have three to list; better to have 1-2 that are really meaningful to you. And, yes, totally fine to list extracurriculars from college too.

Awards: This section should be pretty straightforward. We give you the chance to list three awards from any part of your life. You’ll have a small bit of space (200 characters) to give us more detail on how you were chosen for the award or honor (the “basis of selection”). Again choose the awards that are most meaningful to you personally. I can’t think of more advice to give you on this part of the application :)

When you step back from these sections of the application, ask yourself if the things you chose to list give us a good sense of what’s important to you outside of work. Does it give us a sense of the impact you’ve had? If you can answer “yes” then check these two parts of the application off your list!



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Resume / CV

The last element of the application for us to chat about is your resume or curriculum vitae (CV). Your resume gives us an at-a-glance overview of your experience to date. As we get to know you, the resume helps us situate the various elements of your application and helps us see the journey you're on as a leader.

If you run out of room in other parts of the application, for instance in talking about awards or extracurricular activities, feel free to include those on your resume. There is no specific format or template preferred. (Really!) Be as clear and simple as you can, including dates and locations. More than one page is typically not necessary.

This is the last post in this series. My goal has been to demystify the written application process and share some practical tips. Hopefully at least one of these posts has been helpful to you.

We are deeply interested in getting to know you—everything in our process is meant to help us imagine you at Harvard Business School. So, please tell us your personal story in your voice through all the elements of the written application. We can't wait to meet you!