

Your Authentic Story:

A Guide to Communicating Your Value for Business School Admissions





You've decided that business school could be your next step.

Perhaps you're ready for a change from your current position, and you've observed that most professionals in the jobs you want already have MBAs. Maybe you have an idea of the type of problems you would like to tackle in your industry, but you recognize that you need more strategic knowledge to be effective and make real change.

It sounds like business school is on the horizon - but how will you get in? How should you present yourself to the Admissions Committee of your dream program?

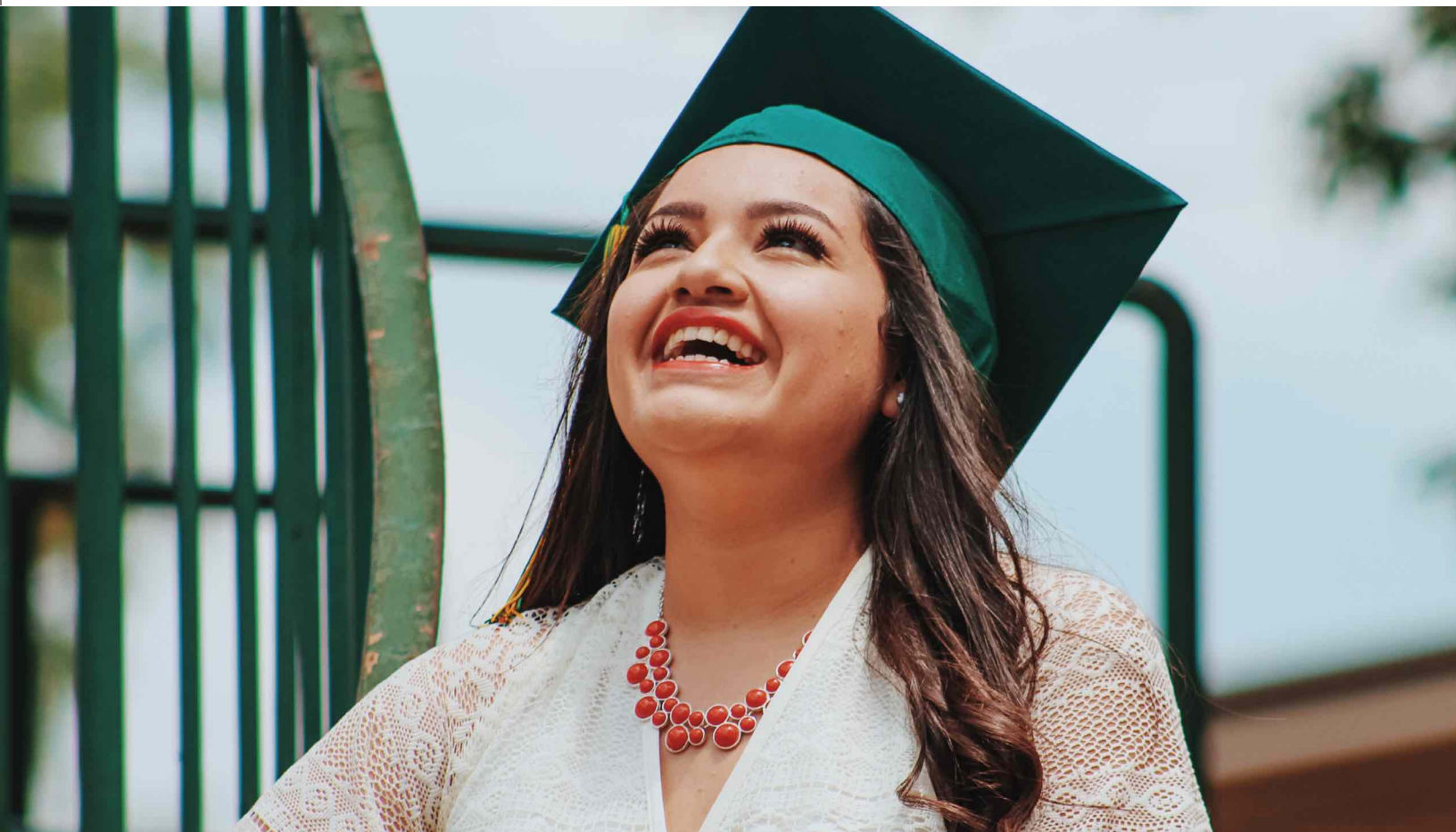
This guide will help you understand:

- Business School Promises You a Transformation
- What Business Schools Are Looking For
- How to Demonstrate Your Qualifications, Uniqueness, and Humanity
- The Importance of Fit
- Putting It All Together: Your Story Arc

We've also included a **worksheet** that invites you to play the role of an Admissions Committee member and write the notes you want them to take from your application and interview.

By working through the questions posed in this guide, you will begin to develop the clear and compelling story that makes Admissions Committees welcome you to top programs with open arms.

Let's get to work!



Business School Promises You a Transformation

Business school can certainly change your job. It can help you pivot to a new specialty, analyze issues in advanced ways, and access different employers.

B-school can also lead to a dramatic increase in **salary**: MBA grads from INSEAD, for example, reported a 95% increase in salary after completing their MBAs, in the Financial Times' 2016 survey of MBA alumni. This immediate increase sets the trajectory for a career marked by increased responsibility and broadening impact.

What's more, your business school experience connects you to an **impressive network** of fellow alumni. The bond is especially strong with the classmates that you work with during your one- or two-year program, but it also extends to the broader network of past (and future) grads of your program.

But it's the **personal transformation** that might be the biggest change of all. "I made more progress in personal self-development in my two years at Stanford than I did for all of the years of my life prior to the programme," wrote one Stanford MBA grad in response to the FT alumni survey.

Overall, business school offers you a huge leap forward, personally and professionally. This is especially true when you take time to carefully consider your own profile and goals, and identify which programs match best with who you are and where you want to go.

Once you've found your best matches, how do you get in?



What Business Schools Are Looking For

Admissions committees look at each candidate based on the full portfolio you present, including your GMAT scores, work experience, and grades from your bachelor program.

But **your story** is the single most compelling aspect of your application. Your story explains:

- how your background has led you to this moment,
- why business school is the next step for you, and
- how this business school will propel your future career.

Specifically, your story should highlight what makes you **qualified**, what makes you **unique**, and what makes you **human**.

Qualifications:

Admissions Committees (AdComs) want to know that you have the intellectual and professional capabilities to succeed in graduate business study **and** your future career. You will likely have classes in fields from finance to leadership to marketing; the AdCom wants to be sure that you won't fall behind your classmates once you're in the program. And since business school rankings are partly based on job placement and salaries after program graduation, most AdComs want to have no doubt that recruiting companies will hire you and compensate you well once you've finished the program.

How do you demonstrate your qualifications?

ACADEMICS: Your bachelor GPA and GMAT/GRE score speak to your ability to succeed academically. If either of these numbers falls below the school's normal range, it can raise a red flag for the AdCom, and you'll need to address the issue in your story.

**Note: Of course, you cannot go back and change your marks from your bachelor's degree. You can, however, retake the GMAT or GRE. If your exam score falls below the normal range for your target school(s), you should seriously consider a retake. Don't wait to be asked.*

PROFESSIONAL: The AdCom wants to see that you are ambitious and promotable. MBA candidates can demonstrate this through upward mobility on your CV: ideally, you've already been promoted.

- If you haven't had a change in title, be ready to describe how you have **grown** in your position(s) - have you taken on extra responsibilities, initiated new projects, or supervised others?
- Many MBA programs use 2 years as the minimum amount of work experience required for admission. What's magical about 2 years? In most industries, it gives you the chance to experience a full business cycle twice - and rising leaders should be already starting to shine on that second business cycle. Think about the times you've proposed process improvements or new initiatives based on what you saw could be better. Make sure to include at least one of these episodes in your story.
- For any anecdotes you share, you can use the STAR acronym to organize your response: describe the Situation, Task, Action, and Result. (see chart below)

Tell Stories Using the STAR

S ituation	Briefly describe the event, project, or challenge faced
T ask	Explain your responsibilities and assignments for the situation
A ction	Describe the steps you took in response to the challenge
R esult	Share the results of actions taken. Whenever possible, quantify these results: a 30% decrease in complaints, a 50000€ increase in revenue.

Uniqueness

AdComs want to compose a class that brings diverse backgrounds and perspectives together. Business school students learn from each other, often just as much as they learn from the professors. What will **you add to the mix?**

How can you show your uniqueness?

- Consider your childhood, your education, your work life, and your passions. What have you done that could be considered unusual among your peers? Here, consider your peer group at the time (for example, your university buddies) as well as your future peer group of business school classmates. Maybe you grew up as the oldest of 8 siblings, you chose to spend a holiday volunteering while your college friends were partying on the beach, or you lived in three different countries before you turned 18. Perhaps you grew up on a farm, or in the center of London. Working for an iconic brand, a family business, or your own startup – each of these can offer a unique perspective and represent a story worth telling.
- Brainstorm a list of these potentially unique attributes. Then think about how they have shaped you, or how they demonstrate a quality of yours. How might they relate to your potential as a leader? How do they shape your views of business, of your industry, or of your role in the world?
You don't need to use all of them. Choosing three to five attributes can help you clarify your unique story for the Admissions Committee.



Humanity

No one likes to work with a jerk who thinks that he or she is infallible. Many effective leaders win over followers by demonstrating their humanity – including their care for others and ability to acknowledge their own weaknesses.

In your application and interview, you don't need to pretend to be **perfect**. In fact, admissions committees will see through someone who isn't willing to acknowledge past mistakes and opportunities for growth.

Self-awareness is a mark of maturity and a major asset for leaders at all stages of their careers. While you'll receive plenty of feedback in business school, AdComs are happy to see candidates who already engage in self-reflection and course correction without being instructed to do so.

Business school is a balance of **teamwork** and **leadership**. Top candidates will demonstrate that they can play the right role depending on the situation.

How can you reveal your humanity?

- Think about times at work (or in your bachelor program, or in a meaningful volunteer activity) when you made a mistake. We're usually not talking about misspelling a word in an email – perhaps you had an error in judgement, or you thought something would work out that just didn't. What did you learn from this experience? How did it change you? Specifically, how did it make you better?
- When have you gone out of your way to help another person on a significant level? An ideal example would be mentoring a junior colleague. How did you help and what did it teach you?
- Consider a time when your perspective dramatically changed after seeing the situation through someone else's eyes. What did you learn? How does this make you a better teammate and leader?

“It is good to have a failure while you're young because it teaches you so much, and once you've lived through the worst, you're never quite as vulnerable afterward.”
- Walt Disney



Be Ready to Communicate

Review your answers to the questions above and select a few stories or anecdotes that help communicate each point. Be ready to tell these stories when the time is right. Indeed, you may be asked interview or essay questions similar to those posed above. But regardless of the specific questions you are asked, make sure to communicate how you are **qualified**, how you are **unique**, and how you are **human**.

The Importance of Fit

You also want to show how your profile fits with the school's own positioning. Of course, when you're applying to several programs, this is a part of your story that must be customized in each application.

If you're applying to Oxford's Saïd Business School, for example, you'll want to align with the school's focus on business as a force for good in society. What aspects of your qualifications, uniqueness, and humanity could help make the connection with socially and ethically responsible leadership?

Alternately, if HEC Paris is on the list, you may want to emphasize the most prestigious parts of your CV, such as work for top brands, or any connections to industries that are strong in France, including the luxury, automotive, energy, banking, or culinary sectors.

In order to truly demonstrate your fit with a particular program, you need to have done your research. Whenever possible, visit your target schools in person so that you can learn firsthand about the program culture from current students, faculty, and staff.

If an in-person visit is out of the question, do everything you can to keep in touch by participating in the program's webinars, online chats, social media and forums. You'll demonstrate that you have real interest and you'll deepen your insight into what makes the program tick, making it that much easier to envision how you would fit in.



Putting it Together: Your Story Arc

Like all stories, yours needs a **past, present, and future**. Your application materials should address the most important aspects of these three phases of your life. Your story should demonstrate an upward trajectory and clearly describe why your chosen program will act as a springboard for your future.

Consider the following thought-starters as you weave your story arc:

The past: How were you influenced by your upbringing, schooling, and university experience? If you have significant work experience, you might include your previous employers or earlier positions in this category. Consider the different cultures and institutions involved. What was most significant? How do they impact the person you are today and the leader you envision becoming? Show that you've learned from your past experiences, the good and the bad.

The present: What is most interesting to outsiders about your current role? If you're not sure, think about the responses you get when you talk to people outside your industry about your job: what do non-experts ask questions about? What challenges have you tackled, and what have you learned? And how does this lead to your vision of your future?

The future: Concrete goals show that you have the ability to envision and communicate a compelling new future. Vision and communication are – you guessed it – leadership qualities. So even though your specific aspirations may change during your business school experience, decision makers need to get a clear picture of your current goals for the near-, medium-, and long-term. Why is graduate business school necessary to achieve your goals? What do you need to learn, and how do you want to change, in order to be the leader you envision?

You need to show that you are ready to grow again: ready to be challenged, to expand your knowledge, and to earn that bigger position when the program ends.

Admissions Committee Notes

A Worksheet

Fast forward a few months in the future. You've put together a fantastic application and you're shortlisted at your top choice schools. Now, put yourself in the shoes of the Admissions Committee members. After reading your application or interviewing you, what would you like Admissions Committee members to remember about you?

Use this worksheet to envision the notes that AdCom members might take from reading your application or interviewing you. Print multiple copies of the worksheet to customize for the different schools you are targeting.

Notes from the Admissions Committee of: _____

The Candidate's Brand

Who is this person as a professional? Why is she working in her chosen field, what skills and attributes does she bring, and what does she target for the future?

What makes this person tick? What motivates him, and how does he motivate others? How does he handle success and – perhaps more importantly – how does he deal with failure?

How will this candidate enrich the experience of other students in our program? What experiences and insights – from different cultures, industries, organizations, and ideas – will she bring to classroom discussion and group projects? How will her presence make the other students better?

Candidate's Fit with Program: Brand Us

Why does this student want to come here?

What does he believe our program has to offer? How does he see us as different from other business schools?

What is the connection between her background and goals and our offer?

**Special Note: We do mean print. Although we thrive in a digital world, there's real value to writing personal insights by hand: some studies suggest we remember things better when we've handwritten them. Indeed, we recommend printing out this sheet and writing your notes with a favorite pen*

Next Steps

In this guide, you've begun to identify the key aspects of your story - what makes you qualified, unique, and human - and you've started to arrange them in a story arc of your past, present, and future. You've also thought about fit, and how to tailor your profile to communicate fit with each of your prospective schools. Finally, you've envisioned the notes you would like AdCom members to take about you based on your application materials and interview.

The next step is to reflect about this process. Find time with a few people who know you best to discuss your plans and the positioning you've identified so far. Does it ring true to them? Are there key aspects that you're missing? Getting outside feedback is invaluable in the process. This will also be true as you write your essays and prepare for your interviews: make sure you schedule time to get feedback from people who know your abilities and whose opinions you value.

Revise your answers on the Worksheet based on these discussions and as you gather more information about your target programs. Then, use your updated Worksheet as a guide when writing your essays and preparing for your interviews. By keeping focused on these key messages that you would like Admissions Committee members to retain about you, you'll be more likely to effectively communicate the story you want to tell.

A Professional Opinion

It can be daunting to clarify and communicate your personal profile in a way that Admissions Committee members will value. At Bright Outlook, we offer Admissions Consulting services to help you with each step of the process, from selecting programs that fit your profile and goals, to completing each stage of the application process. We work with candidates worldwide and can help bridge potential cultural differences to align your materials with the expectations of your target programs. We're focused on Brand You and serious about your success.

For more information, reach out to us at consulting@brightoutlook.global or visit our website at <https://brightoutlook.global/consulting>.

