

How to Write a Successful MBA Admissions Essay

Powerful Tips for Improving Your Odds of Gaining Admission to the MBA Program of Your Choice

Admissions essays are easily the most challenging part of the MBA application process, and it's no wonder. Most people don't like to write, and even those of us who do enjoy writing can come up blank when called upon to write about ourselves, especially when so much is at stake.

The fact remains: If you want to go to business school, you have to be able to generate one or two thousand carefully chosen words that sum up your background and experience, your career goals, your reasons for seeking the MBA, and why you've chosen the program to which you're applying.

Step one: Relax. Writing admissions essays is stressful—it's supposed to be stressful—but that doesn't mean it's impossible. Everyone who has ever applied to business school has written admissions essays, and so can you. All you have to do is submit essays that are a little bit better than most of the others, and if you follow the advice we'll cover in the following pages, it will be a lot less painful.

Most MBA essays are mediocre

The good news is that most MBA admissions essays are mediocre at best. If you can at least come up with a marginally compelling narrative, and if you can spell and punctuate everything correctly—or know someone who can—you'll automatically have an advantage over much of the competition.

This guide is designed to help you get started (the hardest part) and avoid common mistakes that can ruin your chances of admission to a top MBA program. First, we'll discuss several tips for writing better essays. After the tips you'll find a "[Guide to MBA Essay Writing Style](#)" on page 6, followed by "[Getting Started](#)" on page 9," including several easy, fill-in-the-blank exercises that will help you generate actual material that you can use in your essays.

Tip #1: Get started

Procrastination is your enemy. The sooner you get started with your essays, the sooner you'll finish them, and the earlier you submit your completed application package, the better your chances of admission.

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Try not to focus on the entire task. Break up your essay writing into manageable pieces, and don't attempt to write a perfect essay in one sitting. Take it one step at a time, and it'll be a lot easier. All you have to do is keep making forward progress.

Right now, take out a piece of paper or open a new Word doc and write the following: "I want to earn the MBA so I can _____." Then fill in the blank.

Examples:

- I want to earn the MBA so I can *get a better job and make more money.*
- I want to earn the MBA so I can *be more competitive at my current job.*
- I want to earn the MBA so I can *get a job in a different industry.*
- I want to earn the MBA so I can *transition out of engineering and into marketing.*

Go ahead, do it right now, before you continue reading.

Done? Good. A minute ago, you hadn't written anything. Now you've written one sentence, and it's a very important one. This statement lies at the core of your application. If you can write this one sentence, you can write a paragraph. And if you can write a paragraph, you can write a whole essay. And if you can write one essay, you can write two or three or four essays.

Don't like your sentence? Don't worry, you can rewrite it later. Even professional writers have to edit and rewrite heavily before their work is finished. In fact, the words you're reading right now had to be rewritten at least three or four times before I was satisfied with them. That's how writing works. The first draft is just to get your ideas down on paper or onscreen. Then you edit.

Try another sentence. Start it with, "My long-term goal is to _____."

Examples:

- My long-term goal is to *start my own hedge fund.*
- My long-term goal is to *start my own environmental nonprofit management consulting firm.*
- My long-term goal is to *bring modern communications technology to developing third-world countries.*
- My long-term goal is to *become CEO of a large manufacturing firm.*
- My long-term goal is to *become the marketing director at the bank where I work.*

You'll find a lot more of these fill-in-the-blank exercises beginning on page nine to help get the words flowing. For now, keep pen and paper or computer handy so you can jot down ideas as they come to you while you're reading. Then, by the time you're finished, you'll already have some material to work with.

Now write down a short-term goal. This is usually much easier because it's more obvious how you'll get from point A: where you are now, to point B: business school, to point C:

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the type of job you'll be able to get right after you finish business school. Consider using the following form:

“My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by _____.”

Examples:

- My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by *gaining experience with a boutique hedge fund.*
- My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by *working for the EPA as a compliance officer.*
- My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by *working as a marketing manager for a major wireless carrier.*
- My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by *gaining finance experience with a large manufacturer.*
- My short-term goal is to support my long-term goal by *working for a large consumer goods firm.*

Remember, just getting started is the hardest part. A good way to ease into it is to simply write a few sentences for any given question. You'll find simple exercises beginning on page 9 to help you get started with all of the major MBA question types, including a repeat of the above material.

Tip #2: Avoid “dramatic” intros

Many applicants believe that compelling essays have to have dramatic, gripping introductions. For example, “As I plummeted toward the ground at 120 miles per hour, it finally came to me what I really wanted to do with my life” The trouble with this type of dramatic device is that it doesn't say anything about you except, in this example, that you like to engage in high-risk leisure activities.

Why not stick to the relevant facts? “My long-term goal is to develop and market software applications for small-to-medium-sized healthcare organizations” is much more compelling to an MBA admissions officer than an empty statement about dangerous leisure pursuits.

Exception: If you've climbed Mt. Everest or sailed solo across the Pacific Ocean, by all means use it, but even then, make sure it's appropriate. For example, if the essay question is “What is the hardest thing you have ever done?” and your answer is “I summited Mt. Everest,” then lead with that.

The difference between jumping out of an airplane and something on the level of scaling the world's tallest peak is that the latter demonstrates significant motivation, planning, and self-discipline, all of which are qualities that MBA programs value. It goes without saying that you should not claim to have summited Mt. Everest if in fact you have not.

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Tip #3: Don't tell them what you think they want to hear

Writing your essays based on what you think admissions committees want to hear is one of the worst mistakes business school applicants make. In fact, some programs specifically tell you not to do this.

What they want to hear is your unique story. I knew people in business school who had been teachers, building contractors, musicians, and sales people, among many other professions. If you try to package yourself in a way that you think will be more appealing to admissions committees, your insincerity will be obvious. Why? Because your essays will sound exactly like all the other essays written by applicants who made the same mistake, and believe me, there are a lot of them. Be honest. Your honesty will be much more compelling than anything you can make up.

Tip #4: Answer the question(s)

You would be amazed at how many people do not answer the question, ranging from the blatant—for example, failing to state your long-term goal when the question specifically asks, “What is your long-term goal?”—to the more subtle, for example, answering all three parts of a question when the instructions say, “Answer two of the following three parts.”

It is impossible to overstate the extent to which failing to answer the question will hurt your chances. Read each question carefully, preferably several times. Reread the question after you've finished writing to make sure the answer you've given is appropriate. Ask friends or colleagues to read the essay questions and your answers and give you feedback on whether you've provided the specific information requested.

Tip #5: Give relevant examples

Whenever possible, use examples to illustrate your points. Show rather than tell. Making empty claims with nothing to back them up will not impress admissions committees; relevant examples will. For example, if you say, “I have always had a strong talent for organizing groups,” don't stop there; follow up with something like this:

“For example, in high school, I organized a fundraising effort for the school's marching band so we could go to the national competition in Washington, D.C. I started by convening a brainstorming session with the entire band”

Or let's say you're good at coming up with breakthrough creative ideas. Say so, and then give examples. Using examples in this way is important because it 1) demonstrates your ability to think logically and communicate effectively and 2) shows admissions committees how you see the relevance of your experiences to your ability to succeed in business school and beyond.

After you finish your essays, put them aside for a day or two so that what you've written is not so fresh in your mind. Then read them again carefully, looking for claims that you've made that don't have adequate examples to back them up.

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Tip #6: Avoid empty flattery

Many applicants make the mistake of trying to ingratiate themselves with the admissions committee by saying nice things about the program and its professors. For example,

“The Wharton School is one of the top-ranked finance programs in the world.”

“Northwestern’s esteemed professors have the expert knowledge I need to take my career to the next level.”

“Harvard Business School is the preeminent MBA program worldwide.”

If your drafts include any statements like these, delete them now. They are a waste of precious space. Worse, they suggest that you 1) have nothing substantive to say about yourself and 2) have not lifted a finger to find out anything about the program.

Do your homework and say something meaningful

Wharton knows that they’re one of the top finance programs; Kellogg knows that their professors have expert knowledge; and Harvard knows they’re number one. Empty flattery will not impress them. Instead, say something that shows you’ve done your homework.

Example:

“The Wharton School’s reputation as a leading finance program is well known, but what makes your program my top choice is Dr. David Smith’s research in derivatives pricing. I have followed Dr. Smith’s work closely since my junior year in college. In fact, I got the idea for my graduate thesis from his paper ...”

See the difference? Anyone can say, “You have a wonderful program,” but if you’ve done your research and can say something meaningful about the program and why some specific aspect of it makes you a good fit, you’ll get much more positive notice from the admissions committee.

Tip #7: Be concise

Nothing frustrates admissions officers like wordy, rambling MBA essays that use far too many words than necessary to express the ideas being presented. One of the most common mistakes made by MBA applicants is adding words because they only have 400 words, for example, and the question specifies “500 words maximum.”

Don’t focus on word counts

Essay questions indicate maximum word counts because if they didn’t, applicants wouldn’t know when to stop. Plus, someone has to read all these essays, and they only have a few months in which to do it. “Maximum” means *that number or less*. If you use more words simply for the sake of padding your word count, it’ll be obvious, and it won’t help you. A tight, well-written 400-word essay will beat a bloated 475-word essay every time. Focus on the relevant facts, and try to eliminate as much extraneous detail as possible.

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Tip #8: Be positive when explaining negative elements

If you have something in your background that needs explaining, e.g., a low GMAT score or low GPA, be as positive as you can and try not to sound like you're making excuses or blaming someone else.

For example, if you didn't have time to study for the GMAT because you work long hours, don't say, "I could have done better on the GMAT if I would have had more time to study." Instead, say something like this:

"I have always done very well on standardized tests. However, for the past six months my group has been involved in the firm's largest merger deal in its 70-year history, and I made the conscious decision to focus on the deal at the expense of spending adequate time preparing for the GMAT. The deal was as fascinating as it was challenging, and I hope to have the opportunity to discuss my central role in it during my finance classes at Stanford. If I am not admitted this year, I plan to retake the GMAT in the fall and reapply next year."

In this example, the candidate highlights an extremely valuable real-life experience by way of explaining a less-than-ideal GMAT score. The candidate takes responsibility for the decision to focus on an important merger deal even though it meant less time spent on GMAT preparation. This is much better than either ignoring the problem or making excuses. Of course, you should never make anything up, but you should definitely look for a positive angle.

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A Guide to MBA Essay Writing Style

Different types of writing use different styles. Admissions essays should be on the formal side. You can get away with some creativity, but there are certain rules that, if followed, will improve your chances tremendously.

Use the active voice – The "active" voice is more powerful than the "passive" voice. "I led an important project for my group" is an example of active voice; "An important project was led by me" is a passive-voice version of the same statement. In general, the active voice is more powerful and easier to read.

Ensure flawless grammar, punctuation, and spelling – Many MBA applicants submit essays that are filled with basic grammar, punctuation, and spelling mistakes. The people who will be reading your essays are highly educated individuals, and they read thousands of essays each year. They'll spot mistakes instantly, and mistakes tend to attract disproportionate attention. As an analogy, when you see someone with a coffee stain on their shirt, which do you notice more, the stain, or how nice the rest of their outfit looks?

I recommend using a basic writing guide such as *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk and White, especially the section on punctuation. This is a really short book, it's an easy read,

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and it's packed with examples and easy-to-follow advice. You can find it at most bookstores, or online at Amazon.com or Half.com.

Ask others to proof your work, but don't be lulled into thinking that everything is fine just because your friends say your essays look good. They're your friends—of course they're going to say nice things about your work.

Here's how to find out what they really think—ask them the following question: *If you had to name one thing that could possibly be improved, even just a little bit, what would it be?* Now you'll hear what they really think: *Well, I guess it's a little wordy You know, that part about your trip to China didn't really seem that relevant to me I was wondering why you didn't go into more detail about that business you started. Just because it didn't succeed doesn't mean it wasn't a good experience* and so on.

Make sure your reviewers understand that you really do want tough, critical comments, not empty praise, and you'll be much more likely to generate valuable feedback. And whatever you do, don't argue with them; if what you meant to say isn't coming through on the page, you need to rewrite. Remember, you're not going to be on hand to explain to the admissions committee what you *meant* to say.

Avoid humor – In general, avoid trying to be funny in your MBA admissions essays. This is not the place to try to get laughs; it's serious business, and admissions committees take it very seriously. If you joke around, they're going to conclude that you are not a serious candidate. If there's something genuinely funny about a situation you're describing, let the humor come out naturally.

Do not use conjunctions – Do not use “can't,” “won't,” “don't,” “wouldn't,” and so on. Spell out each word. Conjunctions are fine for less formal, more conversational writing—I use them throughout this essay writing guide, for example—but you should not use them in your MBA essays.

Exception to the above – If you're quoting a conversation as part of an example you're giving, then do use conjunctions. Otherwise, the statements will sound stilted and unrealistic. People use conjunctions naturally in everyday speech, so if you're recounting a conversation, conjunctions are OK. Be sure to use quotation marks (“”) when quoting conversations, and read the material out loud or have someone read it to you to see if it sounds natural.

Avoid excessive acronyms – Acronyms make reading needlessly difficult, and your primary goal is to make your essays as easy to read as possible. Well-known acronyms such as IBM and MBA are fine, but resist the urge to introduce specialized acronyms used in your industry or company. The reader will forget what they mean and be forced to keep retracing their steps to look them up, and they'll lose their focus on the story you're trying to tell.

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Do not use exclamation points – Many MBA applicants are tempted to use the exclamation point (!) to emphasize important points and statements. Example: “We now had only two weeks to complete the software build!” Resist this urge. Let the reader decide for him or herself how impressive or astounding the statement is.

Do not overcapitalize – There’s an unfortunate tendency in business to capitalize all sorts of words and phrases inappropriately. Do capitalize the first word in a sentence and all proper nouns (names of people, places, products, and companies). Do not capitalize anything else, even if you think it’s important. Use a dictionary to look up terms if you’re not sure whether they should be capitalized.

Do not use “&” in place of the word “and” – In recent years, people have begun using the ampersand (&) in place of the word “and” across the board. This is wrong, and admissions committee members will notice. The ampersand should be used in company names and partnerships (think law firms, e.g., Croucher, Carruthers & Doyle), and in some newspaper headlines, but that’s it.

Break up run-on sentences – Be careful not to let your sentences go on for more than two lines. It’s best to use sentences of varying lengths, mixing short sentences with longer ones. Run-on sentences are bad because they make it difficult for the reader to follow the point you’re trying to make.

Break up long paragraphs – Excessively long paragraphs are harder to read than shorter ones. When you change subjects, start a new paragraph. It’s not always easy to know when to end paragraphs. In general, try not to let paragraphs go on for more than five or six lines. I’ve seen 600 – 700 word essays that don’t have any paragraph breaks at all. If yours are too long, break them up.

Don’t trust your word-processing software’s grammar and spell check tools – Admissions committees have expert English language skills, and they will notice the smallest mistake, so be prepared to look things up. Have a good dictionary and a thesaurus handy, and use them. Writing a strong essay in English can be especially difficult for non-native speakers, but many native English speakers have problems in this area, too. Writing standards get more lax every year, and many people simply don’t know the rules.

Ask for help – If you’re not confident that your writing abilities are up to the job, ask friends and associates to review your work, or hire a proofer. Put your draft away for a few days and then read it again to find mistakes you missed the first time around.

NEXT: GETTING STARTED

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Getting Started

What are your long and short-term goals?

Long-term goals – Every MBA program wants to know what your long and short-term goals are. Planning to start your own hedge fund? Become the president of the company where you now work? Go into management consulting? Or maybe your goal is less common. Maybe you want to help create public works infrastructure in Africa or bring wireless communication to the Australian outback.

As we discussed earlier, the worst thing you can do is give the answer you think they want to hear. In fact, a more unusual goal can make you stand out. All the top programs receive thousands of applications each year from would-be hedge fund managers and consultants. If you say you want to be a hedge fund manager because you think that's what they want to hear, how competitive do you think you're going to be with candidates who really do want to be hedge fund managers and have been working diligently toward that goal since college?

There are a variety of ways to structure an essay, but consider the straightforward approach, starting your essay with, "*My long-term goal is to [develop and market new software applications for wireless devices].*" This format has the advantage of giving the committee members solid context for the rest of your essay; otherwise, they're left trying to figure out what your goal is and wondering when you're going to answer the question.

Examples:

- My long-term goal is to *start my own hedge fund.*
- My long-term goal is to *start my own environmental nonprofit management consulting firm.*
- My long-term goal is to *bring wireless communications technology to developing countries.*
- My long-term goal is to *become CEO of a large manufacturing firm.*
- My long-term goal is to *become the marketing director at the bank where I work.*

Short-term goals – Short-term goals are usually easier because it's more obvious how you'll get from point A: where you are now, to point B: business school, to point C: the type of job you'll be able to get right after you finish business school.

Consider placing your short-term goal statement right after your long-term goal statement:

"My long-term goal is to [launch my own hedge fund]. My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by [gaining experience as a fund manager]."

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Examples:

- My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by *working for a large hedge fund.*
- My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by *working for the EPA as a compliance officer.*
- My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by *working as a marketing manager for a major wireless carrier.*
- My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by *gaining finance experience with a large manufacturer.*
- My short-term goal is to prepare for my long-term goal by *working for a large consumer goods firm.*

Then you can describe your background and how it relates to your short and long-term goals:

“My long-term goal is to start my own hedge fund. My short-term goal is to prepare for my ultimate goal by gaining experience with a large hedge fund. I became interested in hedge fund management when I started working on Wall Street after graduating from college. I was not even planning on a career in business; I wanted to go to graduate school for math and eventually become a university professor. However, I needed to make money in the short term, and a friend who worked at a large investment firm told me they needed statisticians and offered to help me get an interview”

This is a strong start. It gives the reader solid context for the rest of the essay, plus key information about the applicant's background. Don't frustrate your audience by making them wonder when you're going to get around to stating your goals.

No matter how you choose to organize your “goals” essay, be sure that somewhere is a statement that begins, “My long-term goal is ...” and another one that begins “My short-term goal is ...” Otherwise, you'll be on the fast track to the reject pile.

Why do you want to attend the [Stanford] program?

This is a tough question because, despite reputations in specific functional areas, every top MBA program is strong in every area. Wharton might be well known for finance, and Kellogg has a reputation as a strong marketing program, but none of the top programs are weak in anything. You need to come up with more than, “*I want to attend the Wharton program because I am interested in a career in finance and Wharton is the leading finance program,*” or, “*The Kellogg program is my top choice because of my strong interest in brand management.*”

Show them that you've done your homework. There are several ways to gather useful information. Read everything you can get your hands on about the programs you're interested in, including books and magazine articles (Business Week and U.S. News are especially good). Do online and library searches. Attend regional events sponsored by the programs. You can find out if your city has any scheduled events by contacting

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admissions directors' offices. You can also ask for alumni contacts who work in the field you're interested in. Schedule on-campus visits and talk to current students and admissions personnel.

Use what you learn in your essays: *"When I visited the Sloan School earlier this year, I talked with a number of students, and I was impressed with their breadth of experience. I was under the impression that MIT attracts primarily 'techie' ..."* This will demonstrate to the admissions committee that you're serious about business school and that you made significant efforts to determine which program(s) are right for you.

Read everything on MBA programs' websites

Go to the programs' websites and read everything you find there. I had a client who was interested in fund management. This individual was applying to a program that actually had its own student-run fund, and the applicant was not aware of this fact *even though it said so right on the home page of their website*. I found out about the student-run fund while looking up something else for the essay. Reading all publicly available information is critically important. You can also research specific professors. These are top people in their fields, and online searches will typically yield pages of links.

When you have all of your information, start writing simple statements about the program(s) and about yourself:

"I live in New York." "My family lives in New York." "I work on Wall Street." "I plan to continue working on Wall Street after business school." "NYU is close to Wall Street." "I am interested in derivatives." "The Stern program has one of the leading derivatives researchers in the world."

Before long, you'll have a lot of useful material. Don't self-edit based on what you think is appropriate for your essay. Editing comes later.

Tell us about your personal and family background.

This question sounds straightforward, but it's a huge topic. What should you include? What should you leave out? Again, writing a series of simple sentences is a good way to start:

"I was born and raised in suburban Philadelphia, Pa." "My father worked as a salesman, and my mother was a secretary." "I took ROTC training in college." "My father taught me how to build furniture." "I played trumpet in the high-school band."

It may seem mundane to you because it's your life and you're very familiar with it, but the admissions committee will be learning about you for the first time, so don't take anything for granted. You have a lifetime of experiences to choose from. Don't think about it too much or it'll overwhelm you. Just start writing things down. Once you've written enough simple, declarative sentences, themes will begin to emerge from your statements. Then it will be easier to focus on specific topics.

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Example:

My father had only a high school education, but he was very wise. He taught me that the most important thing is not how much education a person has, but rather how that person uses the resources that are available.

Tell us about a situation in which you took a leadership role.

The relevance of this question is obvious, but don't assume that examples have to be work-related. A non-work-related leadership experience can be just as powerful.

Make a list of potential candidates:

"I took over a project group at work after the assigned lead quit halfway through."

"I organized the kids in my neighborhood to pick up trash around the lake."

"I formed a band in college and secured a record deal."

After making your list, write down a few details about each one and see how you feel while you're writing. Go with the one you're most excited about; the excitement will come through in your essay. Be sure to include the outcome of the experience and the difference your leadership made.

What will you add to our program?

Even if they aren't asking this question, it's important to suggest to the admissions committee that you have something to offer their program, that you're not just there to have your ticket stamped so you can go out and make your millions. Indeed, one of the best resources you'll find in any good MBA program is the knowledge and experience of your classmates.

Start with a general statement indicating the direction you plan to take ...

"I have always been a strong organizer, but I think my most valuable trait is my ability to gain consensus and foster a strong team spirit."

"I am a doer. Work groups have a tendency to talk and plan too much in my opinion. I am good at providing motivation to move forward."

... and then continue by giving examples of the qualities you bring to the table and how they will benefit the program to which you're applying. Don't list too many qualities; one or two or three is plenty.

Describe a situation in which you experienced failure. What did you learn from the experience?

This is a difficult question; you're trying to put your best foot forward, after all, not talk about failure. Everyone has faced failure at some point in his or her life. Admissions committees are interested in learning how you deal with failure and how you learn from it.

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Use an example in which you had significant control, but, despite taking prudent steps, you reached an unsuccessful outcome. The key elements to cover include frankness, taking responsibility for the failure, and highlighting key lessons you learned from the experience.

Avoid finger-pointing and excuse-making. For example, if your coworker stabbed you in the back, say something like ...

“I failed to anticipate my coworker’s natural instinct to protect his own turf. I now know that I should have prepared more thoroughly by gaining this particular coworker’s buy-in so that he would have had a greater stake in the outcome.”

And so on

MBA programs are always coming up with new questions to help them learn more about you and your potential for success in business school and beyond. Just use the process outlined in the “standard” questions above to begin writing your essays. Remember, the hardest part is getting started. Once you’re writing, the words will come more easily. And once you’ve written a rough draft, it’s a just a matter of editing and rewriting until you’re happy with your essays.

If possible, get started early so you can write your drafts and then put them away for a few days. That way, they will be less fresh in your mind and you can review what you’ve written more objectively. Be sure to get second opinions from friends, family, and colleagues, and use professional services if you need them.

If at first you don’t succeed ...

As a final word, try to keep things in perspective. If you don’t get accepted by HBS or Kellogg or Stanford GSB, it’s not the end of the world. If you’re really determined to get into a particular program and you’re not accepted, you can always try again. You can gain additional experience in your field, retake the GMAT, take business courses—the list goes on and on. Persistence is important, and if you’re diligent, you can improve your chances. Good luck!