

GMAT Score

GMAT before everything else. It's sad, but it's true: your GMAT score is probably the most important factor in determining whether you will be admitted to a top business school. I need to clarify that statement, though.

Most applicants believe there is a significant difference between a 680 and a 720 on the test. There isn't. The extra 40 points won't help your chances of being admitted. That's why I'm frustrated when I hear from people who score 680 and insist on retaking the exam. Most of them would be better served by burning their GMAT-prep books and turning their attention to the application essays (the next step in the process).

If you hope to have a reasonable chance of being admitted to a top program, though, your GMAT score will need to be "in the ballpark." If it isn't, you'll have a hard time winning a spot at top-tier schools no matter how good your work experience and undergraduate GPA might be. That's why I believe GMAT score is the most important factor in being admitted to a top program. If your score isn't in the ballpark, you won't be in the game.

So What's Considered "In the Ballpark?"

At virtually all of the top programs, the ballpark starts in the mid 600s. That doesn't mean there is a strict cut-off ; there isn't. But if you look closely at top schools' numbers, you'll see that below about 620 your chances of being admitted fall pretty dramatically.

To determine whether you're a viable candidate at a specific school, find the program's "middle 80 percent" GMAT range. Virtually all schools now report this data. (As do we.) If you're within a school's 80 percent range, you have a reasonable chance of being admitted; and you may be viable even if you're below the range. You should never let your GMAT score be the sole factor that determines where you apply. Simple math dictates that 10 percent of students attending MBA programs scored below the schools' reported 80 percent range (and 10 percent scored above it).

The most common mistake that MBA applicants make is using a school's median GMAT score as a viability gauge. If, for instance, a program's median score is 680, applicants believe they have to hit that number in order to be admitted. It should be obvious that half of the current class fell below 680, but that doesn't seem to register and many applicants self-select out. I've talked many applicants into applying to MBA programs they are now attending (or have already finished) because they were initially discouraged when their GMAT scores fell slightly below their target schools' medians.

The Bottom Line: Don't let the numbers intimidate you. Use the 80 percent range, not the median GMAT value. If you're slightly below the 80 percent range, apply anyway. Ten percent of your classmates next year will be in the same boat.

Are the Separate Scores for Math and Verbal Important?

Yes, especially the math score. The admissions people put a lot of emphasis on math skills when making their decisions. (See the discussion on GPA for more on this.) So it's important that you do well on the math portion of the GMAT.

The math and verbal scores range from 0 to about 52. (I know that GMAC claims the scale can go as high as 60, but it has never actually gone over 52). My strongest students are those in the "40-40 Club." That means they score in the 40's in both math and verbal.

It's great to have that kind of balance, but if you are going to be stronger on one portion of the test than on the other, it's clearly better to be stronger in math.

What if I Hope to Apply to Top Schools But My GMAT Score is Below 600?

You need to take the test again. I'm not saying that you can't get into a top program — you can — but your chances are slim. So if you have time to take the test again, you'd be foolish not to.

And that brings up a good point about multiple test scores. I'm not aware of a single top school (or even an average school for that matter) that still averages GMAT scores. I'm sure that someone out there will find a program that does so, but until I hear from that person, let's stick to the general rule: schools consider only your highest GMAT score.

Can I Take the Test 15 Times and Report Only My Highest Score?

Sort of. Before the GMAT exam begins, the computer will ask which schools you would like your scores forwarded to. You get five schools included in the cost of the test, and any additional programs will cost you \$25 each.

You can elect not to have your scores forwarded to any schools. After you have seen your scores (you get them immediately after finishing the test), you can then pay \$25 each to have them sent to the schools you choose.

Your "GMAT transcript" will report only your three most recent scores. So if you took the test four times and scored 450 each time, but didn't have your scores forwarded, you could still pull off that miraculous 700 the fifth time and then send your scores. The admissions office would see only two 450's and a 700.

It doesn't really matter, though, whether you send your transcript after each test or wait until you score the number you want. In the end, the school's application will ask you to specify the score you want the admissions committee to consider. (And, no, you can't mix and match your best verbal score and your best math score from different tests.)

(By the way, the cost of the final pencil-and-paper test was \$84 and additional score reports were \$10 each. Now it's \$250 and additional score reports are \$25 each. That's a great example of what happens when a monopoly is allowed to operate. Maybe someone in business school can come up with a way to introduce free market forces into the GMAT administration process.)

What About the Essay Score on the GMAT?

You will have to write two essays on the GMAT (the "Analytical Writing Section"). They will be scored on a scale of 1 to 6, and those points will not be added to your other GMAT score.

The essays are extremely simple. I teach my students a basic template to follow and they do very well with it. They regularly score perfect 6's (the 99th percentile) just by following the template.

It's been my experience, though, that your essay score is worthless, so I spend very little time on it in class. A few years ago I asked the admissions director of a Top-5 school what she was doing with the essay scores. She laughed at me and said she wasn't using them at all (though that isn't what her brochures say).

I have to agree with her. The GMAT essays are ridiculous. Given how well some students have done by following a simple formula, the scores seem meaningless. And now the essays are graded by computer, making them even more worthless. So don't spend a lot of time studying for the AWA essays, and don't put too much emphasis on your essay score. I can assure you the admissions committee won't.

A Special Note: The actual essay topics you will see on test day are disclosed in advance! You can find a complete list of them in the current edition of The Official Guide for GMAT Review.

Having the list tempts some people to try to write their essays ahead of time. The pool of essay topics is so large, however, that it would be impossible to write an

essay for each (and remember them all) before test day. Your time would be better spent studying the other sections of the GMAT.

What About Taking the Exam Under "Non-Standard Accommodations?"

Most people don't know that they can take the GMAT with what is called "non-standard accommodations." That means you can get twice as much time as everyone else, if that's what you need to compensate for a medical condition. GMAC doesn't promote this accommodation very aggressively, but I've had many of my students take the test "non-standard" and all of them who have gotten a truly significant accommodation (such as double time) have gone up at least 100 points from what they were scoring with me on practice tests given under standard conditions.

I had one student who consistently scored in the mid 500s with me. He took the test under non-standard conditions (he got double time), went up more than 100 points, and was accepted at Harvard. I don't think Harvard would have taken him in the mid-500s, so the special accommodations worked out particularly well for him (as did HBS).

Should I Take a GMAT-Prep Course?

If you hope to go to a top school, you'd be crazy not to prepare for the GMAT. Being admitted to Kellogg or Columbia or Stanford or a similar school is well worth the time and money invested in a good prep course.

I don't want to steer you toward one company over another, but I would suggest that you take the longest, most comprehensive course available in your area. And look for a good instructor. A good teacher can reveal subtleties about the test that aren't written into any book, and just having the structure of a class will force you to work harder than you would if you chose to study on your own.

The Bottom Line On GMAT Scores : How to get a Perfect GMAT Score

Perfect GMAT scores are surprisingly rare at the top business schools. Every year I'm shocked to see the highest reported score at Stanford, Harvard, Wharton, Kellogg, Columbia and the other top schools because it's typically a 790 or 780 or even a 770. Getting a perfect GMAT score isn't terribly difficult if you're willing to work (ask my students how hard I work them), but it also isn't necessary and you shouldn't waste your time prepping for points you don't need.

Take the GMAT very seriously, though. If you score 560 you won't be going to Wharton, and all of your excuses for not finding time to study will be little consolation. Work hard in your course! And if you don't like your first score, take the test again. Keep taking it until you get the score you want.