

Personal Statement Guide

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About mbaMission

Since Ambassadorial Speechwriter and MBA Jeremy Shinewald founded mbaMission in 1999, we have worked closely with business school candidates from around the world, successfully guiding them through the entire admissions process (“from start to finish”) and ensuring that each of their unique attributes is showcased in a creative, compelling and focused way. We are professional authors with elite MBA experience who work one-on-one with clients to discover, select and articulate the unique stories that will force admissions committees to take notice. We assist with all aspects of the application process, helping to reduce candidates’ stress levels and maximize applicants’ chances of gaining admission to top American and international business schools.

mbaMission offers all aspiring MBAs a free half-hour consultation with one of our Senior Consultants. Visit www.mbamission.com/consult/ to sign up.

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About the Author

Often quoted in major media outlets (including the *Wall Street Journal*, *U.S. News & World Report* and *Bloomberg Businessweek*) on MBA admissions-related matters, Jeremy Shinewald is the founder and president of mbaMission, the world's leading business school admissions consulting firm. mbaMission is the only MBA consulting firm recommended by Manhattan GMAT and Kaplan GMAT, the two largest GMAT test prep providers in the world. Shinewald is a highly sought after speaker on business school admissions topics, addressing audiences in New York, Dubai, London, Tel Aviv, Los Angeles and other major cities on a regular basis.

Before founding mbaMission, Shinewald was chief speechwriter for the Ambassador of Israel to the United States, for whom he wrote more than 70 speeches. He was admitted to several top domestic and international MBA programs himself and ultimately became one of the youngest members of his class at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business, where he was an admissions interviewer, wrote a business ethics case and was chosen by his peers to be Class Graduation Speaker.

Shinewald is a founding member of the Board of Directors of the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants, an organization committed to upholding the highest standards of ethical practice in MBA advisory services. He is also a founding board member of Venture for America, a nonprofit organization committed to providing talented undergraduates with positions in the "trenches" at start-ups.

Introduction

“I didn’t know what I wanted to do after college, so I applied to the business schools at Harvard and Stanford. I think all I needed to do was send a transcript and fill out a basic form. I got accepted at Harvard, but Stanford asked me to get a year of work experience first, so I decided to go to HBS. Getting in just wasn’t that big a deal.”

If it were only so easy... The words above were spoken by a member of Harvard Business School’s (HBS’s) Class of 1968, and what is undoubtedly clear to you is that times have certainly changed. These days, HBS receives approximately 9,000 applications each year for the 900 available seats in its next incoming class. Meanwhile, Stanford gets more than 6,000 applications for its roughly 400 spots. Obviously, getting into a top MBA program now requires more than sending in a transcript and sitting back and waiting for an acceptance letter. In fact, the business school application scene has become so competitive that this graduate—and countless others—laments, “I never would have gotten in today.”

Competition for a place in the leading business schools’ student body is intense and truly global. Every year, admissions officers shake their heads in wonder at the amazing candidates they simply do not have room to accept. Even if you have a competitive profile, many other highly qualified candidates want that place, too—and will battle you for it. In the end, whether you succeed or fail depends on how you communicate with your target school’s admissions committee. And with competition this fierce, you cannot expect to be able to write a standout application in a single afternoon.

We have written this guide to assist you in using your time wisely and effectively to make the most of the application process. After more than a decade of helping MBA applicants get into the top American and international business schools, we know what it takes to compel an admissions committee to send that coveted letter of acceptance. That is not to say that we possess special admissions “secrets” or “shortcuts,” however—those simply do not exist. A successful application requires time and *work*, and this guide will help ensure that your efforts are targeted and productive.

Although the business school application process can certainly be stressful, it definitely does not need to be. With some basic organization and a straightforward strategy, completing your application can actually be enjoyable and rewarding!

We encourage you to visit our Web site, www.mbamission.com, where we offer complete and detailed analysis of the essay questions for the top American and international business schools, as well as free weekly writing tips, lesser-known facts about the leading MBA programs and exclusive interviews with these schools’ admissions directors. Explore our blog and return to it frequently—we are constantly updating it and adding new, free resources.

Of course, the information in this guide and the analysis and tips on our site are no substitute for working with a dedicated mbaMission professional. Each MBA candidate is unique. We all have distinct personal stories to tell, and we all face challenges in telling them. mbaMission consultants are specifically trained to help you share your experiences in the most interesting and compelling way possible and to guide you in taking advantage of every opportunity along the way that might help you gain admission to your ideal MBA program.

We hope you enjoy and benefit from this guide. If you need additional advice on any element of applying to business school, please feel free to contact us for a free consultation.

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Personal Statements

Virtually all top business schools ask applicants for a personal statement in which candidates discuss their goals and ambitions as they pertain to their MBA degree and, often, to the target school's particular program. As you approach this essay, be sure that you place the appropriate emphasis on the "personal" aspect of what you plan to write, because you will need to take ownership of and truly tell your story in a way that is not only clear and compelling, but also reveals your personality and individuality. You cannot afford to be generic or vague when stating your goals or the reasons you want to attend a certain school. Instead, you must write with purpose and conviction to convince the admissions committee that you have maturity and vision and will see your goals through.

In practically all personal statements, you must discuss your past (work experience), present (need for an MBA and the school's ability to facilitate your academic and professional objectives) and future (career goals) with insight and focus. However, note that we actually recommend a past, future, present sequence for this essay, because in this case, the most logical approach is to first give context and background about yourself, then describe your goals and lastly, explain why you need the particular school's resources to achieve those goals. Convincingly explaining why a school's resources are uniquely suited to helping you attain your goals is much more challenging when you have not yet stated what your goals are.

Past: Context and Work Experience

In recent years, top MBA programs have been de-emphasizing work history to some degree in their personal statements. Most schools' personal statement essay questions used to read a lot like this:

"Discuss your work history. Why do you need an MBA to achieve your goals? Why do you want an MBA from our program?"

Our conversations with numerous admissions officers have revealed that many feel the résumé, recommendations, other essays and interview provide enough information about a candidate's background that a work history is increasingly unnecessary. However, some schools still take a traditional approach in their personal statement questions, such as the University of California Berkeley's Haas School of Business:

- *A) What are your post-MBA short-term and long-term career goals? How have your professional experiences prepared you to achieve these goals? B) How will an MBA from Haas help you achieve these goals? (750 word maximum for A&B)*

Meanwhile, other schools' prompts, such as those that follow, do *not* explicitly ask about your past experiences:

- **Columbia Business School 2012:** Why are you pursuing an MBA at this point in your career, and how do you plan to achieve your immediate and long-term post-MBA professional goals? (maximum 500 words)
- **Chicago Booth 2012:** What are your short- and long-term goals, and how will an MBA from Chicago Booth help you reach them? (500 word limit)
- **Dartmouth Tuck 2012:** Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short- and long-term career goals? Why is Tuck the best MBA program for you, and what will you uniquely contribute to the community? (500 words recommended)

If a school directly asks you to discuss your “career progress to date,” do not take this as an opportunity to offer every accomplishment on your résumé. Some candidates make the mistake of writing about their work experience for 75% of their personal statements, even though they are also submitting a résumé with their application. This wastes precious essay space by repeating facts the admissions committee already has elsewhere. If you are asked about your work history, we recommend limiting your discussion to approximately 40% of the essay length and including brief, but strong, examples of success to represent an accomplished career.

When no explicit request is made for information about your past, you should still include some brief background to make your present and future goals relevant. For example, a statement like “My long-term goal is to become director of marketing for a major league sports franchise” becomes much more reasonable—and the stated goal seems more attainable—when information about the candidate’s past experience in sports management is also offered. Context connects the past and the future. With questions like Columbia’s and Chicago Booth’s, you should limit your career history to 75–125 words of the final essay—just enough so your career goals are clearly plausible and connect to a broader story.

Admissions committees are much more interested in understanding the decisions you have made and the processes through which you have grown than reading a summary of your past work experiences. Indeed, the presentation of your career progress in your essay should show professional milestones and momentum toward your career goals. Rather than being exhaustive, your career history in this context should be a story that leads the reader to understand and admire your stated goals.

If you are a career changer, as many MBA candidates are, your work history may not seem to link as definitively with your stated goals, at least in comparison with that of someone who plans to continue working in the same industry or job function after business school. However, you still need to show growth and accomplishment and to highlight capabilities and knowledge. Emphasize the aspects of your career to date that are most relevant to your goals, either because they have served as good preparation for your new intended career, or because they have given you some transferable skills that will be relevant to that career.

Admissions Myths Destroyed: The Admissions Committee Wants a “Type”

Many MBA candidates believe that each business school has one distinct “type” of applicant that it seeks. In this world of stereotypes, Harvard Business School (HBS) is looking only for leaders, Kellogg is interested only in marketing students, Chicago Booth and Wharton are seeking only finance students and MIT Sloan wants only “eggheads.” Of course, these stereotypes—like most stereotypes—are not at all accurate. Chicago Booth wants far more than one-dimensional finance whizzes in its classes, and it provides much more than just finance to its MBA students (including, to the surprise of many, an excellent marketing program). HBS is not a school just for “generals”; among the roughly 900 students in each of its classes, HBS has a wide variety of personalities, including some excellent foot soldiers. If candidates buy in to these misconceptions and adjust (or abandon) their applications or MBA aspirations accordingly, both they and the schools could miss out on some great opportunities. We hope to be able to convince you to eschew the stereotypes...

By way of example, imagine that you have worked in operations at a widget manufacturer for several years. You have profound experience successfully managing and motivating dozens of different types of people, at different levels, in both good economic times and bad. Even though your exposure to finance has been minimal, you erroneously believe that you must be a “finance guy” to get into New York University’s Stern School of Business, your preferred program. So you tell your best—yet naturally weak—finance stories in your application, and suddenly you are competing against a large pool of elite finance candidates who have far more impressive stories to share. Despite the strength of your candidacy, by presenting yourself as what you think the school wants rather than honestly touting your actual strengths and accomplishments, you have essentially sabotaged your chances of being accepted. What if you told your unique operations and management stories rather than trying to compete in the school’s most overrepresented pool? Odds are you would stand out much stronger and bolster your case instead.

We encourage you to truly be yourself in your application—try to set yourself apart from all the others and refuse to be easily categorized—and this is what will make the admissions committee take notice. Of course, if you are still not convinced, you might consider what Derrick Bolton, assistant dean and director of MBA admissions at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, wrote on the school’s admissions site: “Because we want to discover who you are, resist the urge to ‘package’ yourself in order to come across in a way you think Stanford wants. Such attempts simply blur our understanding of who you are and what you can accomplish. We want to hear your genuine voice throughout the essays that you write, and this is the time to think carefully about your values, your passions, your hopes and dreams.”

Kind of makes sense, right?

Future: Career Goals

Again, your career goals should have a logical (if not a professional) connection to your work history. The general idea is quite simple:

past experience + present MBA = future professional goals

Your stated goals need to show very clear direction and purpose. Simply writing, “When I graduate, I want to go into marketing” or “With my MBA, I will enter the field of consulting” without any further clarification simply is not sufficient—you must explain as specifically as possible what you envision yourself doing after business school. What kind of marketing (i.e., consumer products, business to business, etc.)? What knowledge do you have of consulting, and why will you excel? Remember, this is not a statement of dreams, but a statement of purpose, so you need to provide far greater depth. Stating merely that you “want to be a consultant” will reveal that you have not done your homework and do not really understand your field of interest or your possible place within it.

Consider this goal statement, for example:

After graduating from Tuck, I intend to join either the Performance Improvement Group at Bain and Company, specializing in turnaround strategy, or the Operations Group at BCG, focusing on Rigorous Program Improvement.

Although this sentence is out of context, no one who reads it could credibly argue that the writer does not have a clear sense of purpose or knowledge of the consulting field.

Short-Term Goals

As you develop your short-term goals, you must consider the specific role they will play in preparing you to attain your long-term goals. You should demonstrate why you will excel in your pursuits and, ideally, show insight into why the market might even need you. Consider the following example:

Given my background as a wine journalist, I am well aware of the traditional aspects of the wine-making industry and recognize that many vintners are slow to adapt to modern manufacturing and marketing techniques. With my MBA, I will have the specific entrepreneurial and operational skills necessary to develop a small vineyard and nurture it so that it realizes its full potential. I see myself in my first position after earning my MBA as the general manager of an antiquated vineyard in the ABC region, implementing operational efficiencies, accessing capital for growth and marketing a superior product nationally and even internationally.

In this example, the writer’s experience as a wine journalist connects clearly with his future as a general manager at a vineyard. The candidate identifies a specific role to play and even illustrates the logic behind this role, which

is essentially “some vineyards desperately need professional management talent.” The reader is therefore left with a clear understanding of where this applicant is going, why he will succeed and even why he is needed in this field.

In short, the admissions committee needs to see conviction and passion for a path; no business school that requests a goal statement is going to accept applicants who are unfocused with regard to why they want an MBA. However, conviction does not need to mean rigidity. Spend some time thinking through your goals very carefully. If you are not able to pinpoint an exact choice—or if you can envision more than one feasible route to your goal—offering an alternative (or two) to your short-term goal may be acceptable. (Note, of course, that any substitute path still needs to involve a logical connection from past to present to future.) Consider the following example of offering alternate goals:

In the long term, I would like to head a nonprofit organization that focuses on offering career guidance and mentorship to inner city high school students. I see two possible paths for achieving this goal. In the short term, I could work at a nonprofit with a similar mission, such as the Youngest Professionals Organization, working my way up and gaining concrete experience in managing a nonprofit. Or, I could take a slightly different angle, working at Honesty Corporation, which targets its products to inner city youth, to gain a better understanding of that population before moving from the business sector to the nonprofit one.

Someone reading this statement should clearly see that the applicant is quite serious about his or her long-term goal—so much so that he or she can envision at least two feasible routes toward it. Admissions committees want to understand that you are resolved about your plans for the future and view earning your MBA as a vital step in the right direction. Sometimes, maintaining perspective and offering a second possible path can reinforce that determination.

Long-Term Goals

When proposing your long-term goal to the admissions committee, again keep in mind that you will need to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between it and your short-term goal. Note also that long-term goals can be less specific than short-term goals—they essentially represent an ideal aspiration. Although specificity is recommended for statements of short-term goals, admissions committees understand that no one can truly predict the future, so your long-term goals almost by necessity need to be less detailed. However, they should still clearly denote an intended and attainable career trajectory, as shown in the following example:

Given my background as a wine journalist, I am well aware of the traditional aspects of the wine-making industry and recognize that many vintners are slow to adapt to modern manufacturing and marketing techniques. With my MBA, I will have the specific entrepreneurial and operational skills necessary to develop a small vineyard and nurture it so that it realizes its full potential. I see myself in my first position after earning my MBA as the general manager of an antiquated vineyard in the ABC region, implementing operational efficiencies, accessing capital for

growth and marketing a superior product nationally and even internationally. In the long term, I would build on the success of this endeavor and would source and acquire multiple vineyards in need of modernization. Ultimately, I see my role in the firm as one of a portfolio manager, actively managing several vineyards and making decisions about capital allocation while leveraging operational and marketing efficiencies.

Avoid Unconnected Long- and Short-Term Goals

While your short- and long-term goals can and should be whatever you desire for yourself and may even seem quite disconnected from each other at first glance, this is fine as long as you demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between them. After all, your long-term goals are based on the assumption that your stated short-term goals will be reached; the positions you will hold later in your career will be facilitated by those you hold earlier.

For example, a statement like “In the short term, I want to be in marketing, and in the long term, I want to become a banker” would present a significantly disjointed transition—one that would likely perplex an admissions officer or career services advisor who reads it. The wine journalist candidate we have used for some of our examples could have written that he aspired to ultimately develop a resort around this vineyard or start his own consulting company, through which he could help other struggling vineyards identify and correct operational inefficiencies—this would have been equally logical and believable. His long-term goal only matters inasmuch as it makes sense with his short-term goals—it pairs well, in fact! Given that you will be writing about your own personal goals and part of your vision for your career and life, you most likely already know how they connect for you. The key is clearly communicating for the admissions reader how the transition you envision from your earlier role to your later one will play out in your post-MBA years.

Avoid Disingenuous Goal Statements

Rather than expressing their sincere desires, some candidates make up goals they think the admissions committee wants to hear. These applicants tend to believe that the school is seeking only certain types of candidates who plan to pursue specific industries and positions, so they must fit this mold to gain acceptance to the MBA program. Not only is this untrue, but trying to guess what an admissions committee wants to hear and deliver it is also a recipe for failure. The end result is uninformed goals that lack context and sincerity. And considering that all parts of your application package—including your interview with the school, if applicable—should support the same career vision, presenting false goals here can jeopardize your entire candidacy.

Expressing what you truly feel and want to pursue is key. No amount of sophisticated language can make up for a lack of passion. Remember that admissions readers see thousands of essays every year—they are extremely experienced and can easily tell when a candidate is being sincere and when he or she is just trying to say the “right” thing. Besides, writing the truth is not just more effective, it is much easier.

Admissions Myths Destroyed: I Have No Managerial Experience!

You may find it ironic that formal management experience is *not* actually a prerequisite for getting into a top business school, but keep in mind that an MBA education is for those who aspire to become managers and is not necessarily exclusive to those who already are managers. So, if you are concerned that you have not yet had any subordinates to oversee and feel that not having supervised a staff will preclude you from getting into a top MBA program, let us assure you that you are adhering to a myth and should stop worrying. Instead, focus on how you have excelled in the positions you have held and made the most of other kinds of leadership opportunities.

For example, consider the many investment banking analysts who apply to MBA programs each year. Although these analysts are at the bottom of the banks' organizational charts and therefore do not have staffs to manage, they still have demanding jobs and are required to perform at a high level each day to succeed. So, although these individuals cannot share stories about the standout teams they have led, they *can* talk about thriving in an ultracompetitive environment and can reveal their professional excellence via their résumé, essays and recommendations. And second- and third-year analysts can also discuss how they have trained and mentored younger analysts to demonstrate their leadership skills and potential. So, a title and a formally designated staff are not the only elements that can illustrate one's managerial experience and abilities.

If you have not had any opportunities in your workplace to show that you have the interpersonal skills necessary to lead others, you can turn to your community activities for examples or even share instances of personal leadership. The bottom line is that business schools are not exclusively looking for strictly defined managers but for individuals who demonstrate true promise going forward.

Present: Why Our MBA?

Perhaps above all else, business schools want to hear very compelling reasons for each candidate's need for their particular program. Even when a school asks the generic question "Why do you need an MBA to reach your goals?" it is in fact also indirectly asking you, "Why do you need your MBA from *our* school?" and "How will you use our resources to achieve your goals?"

A common mistake among applicants when responding to this question is to simply flatter the school: "XYZ School is remarkable because of its wealth of entrepreneurial resources. I am excited to join a community of aggressive innovators." This sentence is entirely generic; the writer has not offered any insight into his or her reasoning or explained why this particular school's resources are key. Instead, infuse your arguments with school-specific information. For example, using Ross as the target school, this same candidate would be much more effective by writing the following:

I am interested in modernizing the antiquated wine industry but recognize that no rulebook or simple theorem exists for doing so. Thus, I am compelled by Ross's action-based learning approach, and particularly by its Multidisciplinary Action Project (MAP) course. During my seven-weeks on-site—hopefully at an operationally focused industry leader like Toyota or United Technologies—I expect to face “live” challenges and deliver targeted solutions, with the help of my peers and advisors. I regard the MAP experience as the ideal training ground as I prepare to face a host of hands-on management problems in the inefficient wine industry.

In this example, the individual does not simply compliment the school's positive qualities but explains how Ross's unique characteristics and offerings meet specific needs. Although you may not always be able to pinpoint aspects of a program that are entirely unique to that school, the key is to show a connection between the school's resources and offerings and your individual interests and requirements—to make the association very clear and personal. Doing so will convince the admissions committee that you have done your homework and understand how the full complement of that school's resources come together to create a unique and fitting experience.

As a rule of thumb, if you can answer the following three questions about the school in some detail, you will present yourself as sufficiently knowledgeable:

1. What specific/unique academic programs or classes appeal to you and will help you reach your goals?
2. How will you both contribute to and benefit from the school's nonacademic offerings?
3. What elements of the school's atmosphere, the nature of its students or the general sense you get about the school through visits or conversations with students/alumni make it attractive to you?

The idea is not to generate a list, but rather to develop a well-thought-out argument. This is similar to stating your case to a jury: prove to the admissions committee that by taking advantage of its school's specific programs in your areas of need, you will achieve your goals, and suggest that taking these specific programs is the best (or only) way for you to achieve those goals. Consider the following example, in which the candidate focuses on Columbia's entrepreneurial resources with respect to attaining his stated goals:

One of the most appealing aspects of Columbia for me is that entrepreneurship is not just taught but experienced through a wealth of hands-on resources. Through the Entrepreneurial Sounding Board, I will have a vital avenue for testing my ideas and will gain frank feedback from serial entrepreneurs, which will allow me to refine my ideas and avoid common mistakes. After examining and refining my business plan with this feedback in mind, I would ultimately apply to the Entrepreneurial Greenhouse, which would provide me with an unprecedented opportunity to prepare my business for its launch and for sourcing investments even before I graduate.

Personal Fit

Showing your academic and career fit with a certain program is vitally important, but so is showing your personal fit. If you have visited the school or spoken with some of its alumni, students, professors and/or admissions staff, mentioning these direct personal connections can be quite helpful. Your knowledge of the program will seem more substantial and your interest more sincere. Note how in the following example, the candidate mentions several firsthand experiences with the school:

I was deeply impressed by my visit to Darden. From Professor Robert Conroy's clever explanation of the AOL case in his "Corporate Finance" course to the energy of my student host, Tom Brown, who took me to First Coffee, Conroy's class and finally his learning team meeting, I was amazed at the dynamic energy that permeated the Grounds, everywhere I went during my visit. I look forward to being a part of such an outgoing yet close-knit community.

Your Contribution

Often a school will ask applicants to explain what they will bring to the greater MBA program if they are admitted as students. In this case, applicants can refer to such possible contributions as expected participation or leadership in a particular club; past work experiences, which can enrich classroom discussions; an international background, which can bring a global perspective to teams or course work; or even personal characteristics like enthusiasm or humor, which may facilitate bonding between classmates. Be careful to not just present a list of such options, but to truly personalize your proposed involvement in specific student organizations or events and in the school's broader community. Even when a school does not explicitly ask what you can contribute, if space permits, you should still discuss what you could bring to the community, both in class and beyond, if this has not been accomplished implicitly elsewhere in your essay. Here is one example of how to address the topic of contributing to a school:

Outside the classroom, I am excited to get involved in the Operations Club, particularly the Six Sigma Challenge, given my interest in innovating within the wine industry. Needless to say, perhaps, I also look forward to joining and taking a leadership role in the Wine Tasting Club, where I could use my connections to vintners in the region to expand the club's touring program and its connections with recruiters.

Why Now?

An important element of personal statement essays that sometimes gets lost in the shuffle is the "why now" aspect. Candidates understandably focus on detailing their career progress to date, outlining their goals and/or conveying why they are interested in a particular MBA program and either forget or forego any explanation

of why they are choosing to pursue an MBA at this particular time. If a school specifically asks why you feel now is the right time to earn your MBA, do not gloss over or omit this information. Do not assume that it is not as important as the other elements of your candidacy that you wish to express—the school asked about timing, and an important rule in writing any application essay is *Answer the question*. Be sure to take the time necessary to develop a clear, fitting answer to this portion of the personal statement, when asked.

Sample Personal Statements

In this section, we offer several samples of complete personal statement essays. Sample essay A is an example of a “classic” personal statement, for which a school asks applicants to discuss their past experience in depth, whereas sample essays B, C and D are examples of “contemporary” personal statements, for which the school does *not* ask for a profound backstory and has significantly reduced the allotted word count. You will see that sample essays A and B involve the same story from the same person, but in essay A, the candidate discusses his past, his plans and Wharton’s offerings in tremendous depth, whereas in essay B, he tells much the same story, only more succinctly, with less detail.

- A. Describe your career progress to date and your future short-term and long-term career goals. How do you expect a Wharton MBA to help you achieve these goals, and why is now the best time for you to join our program? (1,000 words)

Declining an offer from a Wall Street investment bank after graduating with a degree in economics, I chose a path that stunned my friends and even my family. I returned to San Antonio to join Gimli Furniture—my family’s firm. While I admired my father’s success in growing this high-end retail business from a single-location store into an eight-location chain, we both acknowledged that the firm needed to be reinvented. I therefore joined as marketing manager to reinvigorate our Marketing Department, which I quickly realized was stuck in the past. In my first three months, I overhauled our Web site and simultaneously launched flash sales—a heresy in the high-end furniture world. We soon saw a surge in online and in-store traffic, as well as a sustained 15% increase in monthly sales.¹

Building on this success, I approached my father with another unorthodox idea, but one that met our goal of reinvention—expanding outside Texas. He was initially hesitant, because he knew the local market well. He grasped the potential, however, once I developed a formal business plan that identified nearby Arizona as an ideal expansion destination, given the high number of affluent retirees—our primary customer base—who settle there annually.

¹ When discussing a family business, candidates should show that they have made the most of the opportunity and have had an impact of their own on the organization.

As I embarked on an adventure to open our new Arizona store, I did not have access to our Texas infrastructure and was essentially operating as a small business person. Whether I was hiring almost 100 staff members, developing a public relations campaign, managing negotiations with the bank for inventory financing or creating a supply chain from scratch, I was exhilarated by the lead-up to our opening. I felt an incredible sense of pride when my father and I cut the ribbon on our Scottsdale store on Labor Day 2007. Since then—and amid a recession, even—Gimli-Arizona has exceeded expectations. Within two years, we opened two more stores; now these three are our highest grossing. My father and I clearly see that Gimli once again has a bold future ahead.

This past Thanksgiving, I returned home to San Antonio, and before I even had a bite of turkey, my father started a conversation that would change my life. He told me he was thrilled with our success and wanted me to expand Gimli across the Southwest before he turned the business over to me in a few years—five at most. He had sketched the terms out in a notebook and stated that, in time, he would begin a well-earned retirement and I would become the company's president.² After collecting myself, I set only one condition—that I first earn an MBA. I quoted my father to himself: "Whatever you do, do it right." For me, "doing Gimli Furniture right" means earning my MBA—from Wharton. Only with a Wharton MBA, given the school's strengths in entrepreneurship, finance and family business management, will I possess the skills I need to successfully expand Gimli into a regional chain in the short term and into a national chain thereafter.³

In my case, studying entrepreneurship will be essential as I continue to transform our organization. At Wharton, I would pursue the Entrepreneurial Management major. Through courses such as "Strategies and Practices of Family-Controlled Companies" and "Legal Issues Facing Entrepreneurs," I will lay the foundation for expanding Gimli nationally. Further, "Building Human Assets in Entrepreneurial Ventures" will enable me to tackle an ongoing challenge we face—attracting and retaining excellent people despite our limited financial resources. Through the Entrepreneur in Residence Program, I will receive feedback from experienced mentors and continue to reconsider Gimli's long-held but possibly antiquated operating principles. Finally, via the Wharton Business Plan Competition, I could test a new concept store targeted at a younger demographic, and could thereby learn about possibilities for my firm while testing my entrepreneurial mettle.⁴

Although I do not intend to proceed into a classic finance-centered career, finance will still be important to my education, because Gimli's expansion will depend on large, complex financial arrangements. Thus, "Real Estate Investments" will help me determine whether Gimli should expand into rented or owned facilities, and "Corporate Valuation" and "The Finance of Buyouts and Acquisitions" will prepare me to seize long-term growth opportunities. I appreciate the rich array of finance-related resources offered via the White Center and am particularly excited that the traditional focus of its annual seminar is on household financial decision making, given that almost all Gimli's furniture is purchased for the home.⁵

² The candidate does not simply recite the basic information from his resume but instead creates a narrative that reveals what is unique about his experiences. Remember, you are telling a story about yourself!

³ The writer clearly states why he is pursuing an MBA.

⁴ Because the word limit for this essay is quite generous (at 1,000 words), the candidate is able to go into tremendous depth about why Wharton is the right choice for him. Here he explains in detail how the school's entrepreneurial offerings will facilitate his goals.

⁵ Again, with the greater allowed word count, the candidate can go into great detail—in this case, explaining his need for certain financial skills and naming the specific resources at Wharton that would help him fulfill that need.

⁶ In this paragraph, the candidate enumerates Wharton's unique programs related to family business, again showing that he has fully researched the school and that his interest is serious!

⁷ By sharing the story of his campus visit and his interactions with members of the Wharton community, the candidate demonstrates here that he is not only an academic fit with the school but also a personality fit.

¹ Though the detail in this introductory paragraph is comparatively less than in the previous sample essay, very little information is lost, and the candidate's situation is still easily understood.

² Similarly, the level of detail the candidate provides about the school is still rich. Although the total amount of information the writer is able to include is lessened, he still proves that he knows the school's resources well and understands why he wants to attend Wharton.

Beyond Wharton's broad course offerings, I am also drawn to the school because of the remarkable expertise it has developed with respect to the unique challenges faced by family businesses. Not only would I benefit from family business-oriented courses and from student groups such as the Wharton Family Business Club, I would immerse myself in family business research at the Wharton Global Family Alliance (WGFA). Wharton's foresight in recognizing the important role family firms play in today's business world—and its leadership in establishing the WGFA—immediately made me feel that the Wharton MBA program is uniquely suited to my needs.⁶

Ultimately, however, what draws me to Wharton is the vibrancy and diversity of its community—something I saw for myself when I visited last month. Sitting in on “Statistical Modeling” with Professor Robert Stine was incredible; the sparkle and humor in the classroom discussion turned complex numbers into a simple but profound forecasting lesson. My student guide, Jane Doe, took me on a campus tour, and I could not get over how she enthused about Wharton—as did, quite literally, the dozens of people I spoke to with Jane. The students I met in Huntsman Hall were friendly and energetic, but most of all passionate about their studies, their future and their Wharton experience. That is what I want out of an MBA program. I want to be passionate about my studies, my future career at Gimli Furniture and my overall MBA experience—and Wharton, more than anywhere else, will bring out that passion.⁷

B. How will a Wharton MBA help you achieve your professional objectives? (400 words)

My friends were stunned when I passed up a Wall Street offer to join my family's furniture retailing business in San Antonio. Since starting as the company's marketing director, revamping our Web site and introducing flash sales to a high-end market that had resisted them, I have taken on a business development role and expanded Gimli into Arizona. In three years, I have opened and led three thriving locations, amid a recession that has forced many others to close.¹ Now, with our firm stronger than ever, my father is preparing to retire and hand the keys over to me. I aspire to lead our firm into new states (New Mexico, Nevada) and new retail concepts (bathware, lighting warehouses), ultimately creating a national footprint. I am in this business for the long haul, and before I take over for my father as president of Gimli, I need to prepare myself for an ever-changing and intensely competitive retail landscape. I need a Wharton MBA.

Studying entrepreneurship via Wharton's Entrepreneurial Management major will be essential as I continue transforming our organization. Courses such as “Strategies and Practices of Family-Controlled Companies,” “Building Human Assets in Entrepreneurial Ventures” and “Legal Issues Facing Entrepreneurs” will equip me to expand Gimli nationally.² Through the Wharton Business Plan Competition and the Entrepreneur in Residence Program, I will test my ideas for our “warehouse” concept stores and develop a business plan to implement later. In addition, I will dialogue with fellow students in the Wharton Family Business Club who are also managing the complex issues inherent in family transitions.

I also see my need for a profound financial education. “Real Estate Investments” will help me determine whether to rent or own the massive facilities we require; “Corporate Valuation” and “The Finance of Buyouts and Acquisitions” will prepare me to seize long-term growth opportunities. My course work and experiential opportunities will be all the more meaningful because of Wharton’s vibrant and diverse community, which I experienced when I visited Professor Philip Stine’s “Statistical Modeling Class” last month. I met students in Huntsman Hall who were truly thriving at Wharton and actively creating their envisioned futures.³ I have never been a bystander in life and have always sought to engage with the world to uncover new opportunities. Wharton provides the ideal platform from which to strengthen and continue building not only my future, but that of my family’s company as well.

- C. Why is an MBA a critical next step toward your short- and long-term career goals? Why is Tuck the best MBA program for you, and what will you uniquely contribute to the community? (500 words recommended)

After completing my CPA designation at Ernst and Young’s Philadelphia office in 2009, I transitioned from the Audit to the Mergers and Acquisitions Department, focusing on restructuring firms in bankruptcy protection. Soon after, I negotiated the sale of a \$50M water-bottling company to a French conglomerate, a deal that saved 250 jobs in a one-industry town. Next, I secured \$80M for a metal recycling firm, just in time for the commodities boom. I have found this work intellectually challenging and personally meaningful.¹ Still, I want to achieve more—I want to secure the survival of troubled firms.

My long-term goal is therefore to acquire a distressed firm and lead its turnaround by reshaping its operations and strategy. After identifying an ailing industry, I plan to purchase a struggling company, leverage this acquisition’s success and consolidate additional firms, ultimately realizing “deep value” for investors, employees and society.² To achieve this, after graduating from Tuck, I intend to join either the Performance Improvement Group at Bain and Company, specializing in turnaround strategy, or the Operations Group at BCG, focusing on Rigorous Program Improvement.³ With three to five years of consulting experience recommending strategic and operational changes for a multitude of “challenged” firms, I would be ideally prepared to identify my own niche turnaround opportunity.

My CPA designation has facilitated specialized financial knowledge, but I also need theoretical and practical exposure to all management disciplines. Tuck stands out because its sole academic focus is the MBA, and the heart of its program is general management. Tuck’s core curriculum is especially compelling because of its breadth, but also because of its immediate focus on management decision making via the “Analysis for General Managers” mini-course and the “Leading Organizations” and “Competitive Corporate Strategy” courses.

³ The applicant is also still able to personalize his essay and show that he has truly experienced the school firsthand, in this case through a class visit and other on-campus interactions with students.

¹ If you read the question carefully, you will see that the school is not asking candidates to recount their development over the past several years. Therefore, this applicant does not need to discuss his progress since college. He just needs to provide brief, yet adequate, context.

² The candidate is not required to follow a structure of short-term goals followed by long-term goals, so he chooses to immediately lay out ambitious long-term goals that are directly connected to his previous work with distressed firms. He then follows with his short-term goals.

³ The candidate is not simply saying, “I want to be a generic consultant.” He displays considerable focus and a clear understanding of both where he would fit at these firms and how these positions connect with his stated goals.

⁴ The detail in this section clearly indicates that this candidate has done his homework. He delves into the structure of the curriculum, discusses the appeal of the required core and names several Tuck-specific programs in relation to his stated goals. The reader would not doubt his interest.

⁵ By revealing firsthand experience with the school, the candidate emphasizes his interest and his fit with its MBA program. You must show not only that you will gain the professional training you need while at the school, but also that you will thrive in the community.

¹ This candidate has a very clear sense of where he wants to take his career, citing firms in his target field and revealing knowledge of what the position entails.

² The applicant clearly shows a direct connection between his short- and long-term goals.

Moreover, Tuck's practical opportunities uniquely reinforce principles of strategic thinking. Speaking with current student John Doe, I was excited to discover I could work with likeminded professors and peers to shape my First Year Project and Tuck Global Consultancy experience around my turnaround learning objectives. Through these remarkable hands-on projects, I could develop my targeted learning principles in a "live" environment and on the global stage. Furthermore, I would immerse myself in the Cohen Leadership Program to benefit from consistent feedback from peers, mentors and coaches, with respect to refining my management style.⁴

When I visited this fall, Tuck Connections matched me with fellow CPA Jane Smith, who guided me on a campus tour and invited me to observe her study group. There, I experienced a vibrant discussion on "The Kodak Problem" and could already see opportunities to share my turnaround experience. Moreover, I witnessed a team environment where discussions and jokes spill out of study sessions. Having attended a small college, I know what "living" a community really means. At Tuck, whether I am helping organize the Winter Carnival or Scavenger Hunt or donning my amateur chef's hat for a Small Group Dinner, I will strive to foster the warm, dynamic community that has made a profound impression on me.⁵

- D. What are your short- and long-term goals, and how will an MBA from Chicago Booth help you reach them? (500 word limit)

When I first joined FPC Agencies, none of our clients were using Twitter, and that was just two years ago. Today, one client—a leading car manufacturer—has reduced its TV ad spend by 85%, and we will launch its new vehicle exclusively online. And recently, my firm won the advertising account of a Greek yogurt producer, after I suggested embedding its advertising in mobile video games and pursuing product placement in webisodes. Yet, even as we win business and thrill clients, I cannot help contemplating how to push even further—how can we measure a yogurt ad's impact in a video game or webisode? And how can we optimize such a campaign across all media?

I am pursuing my MBA because I want to shift within the advertising industry from creating advertising campaigns to evaluating business success. I want to work with clients to identify goals and measure results. Upon graduation, I would aspire to join a leading interactive digital consulting firm, like NuKidz Marketing or Local 8 Consulting, where, as a consultant, I would both define client expectations and manage marketing programs across channels.¹ After several years participating in and ultimately leading teams to harness consumer data and assiduously tweak clients' Web sites and mobile platforms—thus implementing narrowly targeted and effective marketing campaigns—I would seek to strike out on my own. With my creative experience, analytical mind, client management capabilities, extensive network within advertising and Chicago Booth MBA, I will possess the skills and experience necessary to launch a digital agency whose mission will be to always quantify results.²

As I began researching business schools, Chicago Booth's marketing program quickly stood out because of its quantitative focus, which speaks directly to my career needs.³ "Data-Driven Marketing," "Data Mining" and "Integrated Marketing Communications" are but a few of the courses I would take toward a Marketing Management major. Further, I would strive to unify theory and practice via a management lab course with a marketing focus, which will provide extensive hands-on consulting experience with a leading consumer products firm—and will no doubt be crucial to my career transition. In addition, I would complement my academic experience with the marketing mentorship program and "day at" opportunities, expanding my knowledge of client environments and benefitting from other professionals' experiences in the field.

My leadership skills will allow me to thrive in a client-driven position and ultimately launch my own firm. I look forward to kick-starting the self-evaluation process in the core LEAD course and will continue to hone my soft skills—particularly in negotiations—through the Managerial Effectiveness Group and bolster my decision-making abilities through "Network Structures of Effective Management" and "Strategies and Processes of Negotiation." I am almost constantly in evaluation mode, examining everything from yogurt ad efficacy to MBA options, but after extensive research and a visit to Professor Dave Goldstein's "Art of Medium Maximization" class, I need no more convincing that Chicago Booth stands alone as the ideal choice for me and my career.

³ Be very careful with stereotypes. Many candidates assume that Chicago Booth is "only" a finance school, but as you can see here, it offers vast resources in marketing as well. This well-informed applicant's demonstration of how well he knows the school's resources will make him stand out.

Appendix A: A Special Exercise for Career Changers

As we noted earlier, many business school applicants are interested in earning their MBA as a way of changing careers. Although schools recognize this trend, they also have to satisfy the needs of their recruiters, most of whom come to campus to hire applicants who already have depth of experience in their field—even more so during difficult economic times, when they tend to become increasingly conservative in their hiring practices. Even when hiring is robust, however, career changers in particular need to be able to prove that they “fit” with their new target career. To effectively do so, they must highlight the components of their past that have provided them with applicable foundational experience or transferable skills for their future career. We have created a worksheet that will help you

- determine the skills and past experiences you should emphasize in your personal statement that will demonstrate continuity, themes and transferable skills.
- think through your short-term goals.
- distill your personal statement down to a one-page snapshot, which you will use as a guide.

Both a completed sample worksheet and a blank one appear on the following pages. To complete the worksheet, follow these eight steps:

1. Enter a summary statement of your long-term goal in Box A, labeled “Long-Term Goal.” The reason for starting at the end in this way is to help keep you focused on your ultimate vision of where you want to be with your career; this will in turn help you decide which skills or traits you will need to be able to attain that goal (and which you will need to emphasize in your essay).
2. In Box B, the “Skills/Traits” box directly underneath the “Long-Term Goal” box, list eight to ten skills or traits you will need to be successful in pursuing your long-term goal. These can include skills/traits you already have as well as ones you do not yet possess. Think about “hard” skills, like financial analysis or expertise in writing business plans, as well as “soft” skills, like the ability to motivate or inspire others.

The purpose of this box is for you to think creatively and comprehensively about what competencies you need to achieve your goal. By then looking at which competencies you already have and which

ones you still need (as you will do in completing the following steps), you will clarify what you will need to emphasize in your personal statement.

3. In Box C, the “Skills/Traits” box directly underneath Box D, “Experience,” list which of the skills/traits you identified in Step 2 you already possess (i.e., that you have gained from your professional, community or personal experiences). Note: this list should be shorter than the list in Step 2, because in this case, you are listing only those skills/traits that you can already claim. The goal of this step is to determine which of your current competencies are important for your long-term goal; these are the traits you will emphasize in your personal statement. For example, let us say that one such trait is an ability to motivate a team, and you do not have any work-related team leadership experience. However, you were captain of a championship basketball team in college. You might not originally have thought of mentioning that college experience, but by listing in Step 2 all the traits you need for your long-term goal, you now know that this team leadership experience is in fact relevant.
4. In Box D, labeled “Experience,” enter a summary statement of the specific experiences that relate to the skills/traits you just listed in Step 3. Using our example from Step 3, in this box, you would list your experience as captain of the championship-winning college basketball team.
5. In Box E, the “Skills/Traits” box located directly underneath Box F, “MBA,” list which skills/traits you expect to gain from earning your MBA degree. Note that this list will be shorter than the list in Step 2, because in this case, you are detailing only those skills/traits you still need to gain. The purpose of this list is to help you identify aspects of the school—specific classes, clubs, excursions, other resources—that will help prepare you to pursue your goals.
6. In Box F, the “MBA” box, summarize the list you just created in Step 5 into a description of what you want to gain from your MBA experience.
7. Look now at the list of skills/traits that you listed in Box B (Step 2) and cross off any that you have listed in Step 3 (those you already possess) or Step 5 (those you will gain in business school). Which skills/traits are left? Those missing skills/traits are what you need your short-term goal to provide. List these in Box G, labeled “Skills/Traits,” directly underneath Box H, “Short-Term Goal.”
8. In Box H, labeled “Short-Term Goal,” write a summary statement of your short-term goal. Ideally, your short-term goal will provide you with the skills/traits listed in Box G (Step 7).

When you have completed these steps, what you will have is a one-page snapshot of your personal statement. This worksheet will help you avoid simply repeating elements from your resume or using up your allotted word count relating experiences that are not connected to your goals. It will help

you tell a story that has continuity and that clearly emphasizes which skills you already have and which you still need to obtain. Although you most likely will not—and probably should not—write the essay linearly (as the information now appears on your worksheet), being able to see all the key components of the essay in one place is extremely helpful and helps ensure that you have addressed all the necessary points.

Sample Completed Worksheet

This worksheet will help you accomplish the following:

- 1. Determine the skills and past experiences you should emphasize in your personal statement that will demonstrate continuity, themes and transferable skills.
- 2. Think through your short-term goals.
- 3. Distill your personal statement down to a one-page snapshot, which you will use as a guide.

D. Experience	F. MBA	H. Short-Term Goal	A. Long-Term Goal
Operations major, worked for three years in China, spent childhood in developing country	Must focus on finance, HR, consulting and build skills in these areas; join clubs for hands-on experience	Obtain position consulting in a developing country	To consult with factories in developing countries on operational improvements

C. Skills/Traits:	E. Skills/Traits:	G. Skills/Traits:	B. Skills/Traits:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">English, ChineseOperations experience in ChinaEmpathy/no judgment (childhood perspective)Leading team at work; developed motivation skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Volunteer, Consulting Club = firsthand knowledgeFinance skills – Finance ClubAlumni networkTake electives on HR challenges in other countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Work for Bain/BCG in China, Ops divisionFind mentor I can learn motivation skills fromImprove operational knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Consulting and teaching skillsLanguages (English, Chinese, Indonesian)Finance skillsMotivational techniquesAbility to suspend judgment, empathyHR tools & knowledgeOperations experience

Blank Worksheet

This worksheet will help you accomplish the following:

- 1. Determine the skills and past experiences you should emphasize in your personal statement that will demonstrate continuity, themes and transferable skills.
- 2. Think through your short-term goals.
- 3. Distill your personal statement down to a one-page snapshot, which you will use as a guide.

D. Experience	F. MBA	H. Short-Term Goal	A. Long-Term Goal

C. Skills/Traits:	E. Skills/Traits:	G. Skills/Traits:	B. Skills/Traits:

- Box A** : Enter a summary statement of your long-term goal.
- Box B** : List eight to ten skills/traits you will need to be successful in attaining your long-term goal.
- Box C** : List which of the skills/traits in Box B you have already gained from your professional, community or personal experiences.
- Box D** : Enter a summary statement of the specific experiences that relate to the skills/traits in Box C.
- Box E** : List the skills/traits you expect to gain from earning your MBA degree.
- Box F** : Summarize the list from Box E into a description of what you want from your MBA experience.
- Box G** : List the skills from Box B that have not been listed in Boxes C or E.
- Box H** : Enter a summary statement of your short-term goal.

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