

mbaMission

Personal Statement Guide

Excerpted from the Complete Start-to-Finish Admissions 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 published authors with elite MBA experience, who work one-on-one with candidates to get to know them intimately and discover, select and articulate the unique stories that will force Admissions Committees to take notice. We work on all aspects of applications, reducing candidates’ stress levels and maximizing their chances of being admitted to top American and international Business Schools.

mbaMission offers all candidates a free half-hour consultation (www.mbamission.com/consult.php).

About the Authors

Prior to founding mbaMission, Jeremy Shinewald was the sole speechwriter for the Ambassador of Israel to the United States, for whom he wrote more than 70 policy addresses. As his speeches were being published in the Washington Post, Washington Times and other major international media outlets, Jeremy was also laying the foundation for mbaMission, helping a small number of applicants gain acceptance to top-tier MBA programs each year. Jeremy 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 a Small Business Acquisitions case and was chosen by his peers to be Class Graduation Speaker.

As a result of his unusual and diverse career, Benjamin Shinewald has developed outstanding writing and editing skills. Benjamin earned a Master’s degree in International Relations from the London School of Economics, where he sat on the Editorial Board of the Millennium Journal of International Studies, and a Juris Doctor from the University of Toronto (Canada’s top law school), where he was an Assistant Editor of the University of Toronto Faculty of Law Review. As a practicing lawyer and an English-language law clerk to the Chief Justice of Israel, Benjamin developed a keen eye for detail and a powerful ability for crafting arguments. Benjamin’s most recent positions include working as a Senior Analyst to the Prime Minister of Canada, a position that has required him to write dozens of briefing notes to two Prime Ministers – and one that has further honed his ability to write effectively. Benjamin’s published work has appeared in a variety of leading newspapers. Benjamin serves as mbaMission’s internal editor.

Introduction

After eight years helping hundreds of MBA applicants get into top American and international Business Schools, we have learned a thing or two about what it takes to compel an Admissions Committee to send that coveted letter of acceptance. While we always work meticulously and intimately with our clients to ensure that their unique stories and qualities shine through in their individual applications, some of our advice boils down to key fundamentals – approach each essay with a brainstorming session, draft an outline, make personal statements truly personal, tailor your resume to the Admissions Committee’s needs, approach your recommenders strategically and prepare extensively for your interviews. Now, via this e-book, we offer our thoughts on these subjects to you, so that you too can begin your journey toward the MBA of your dreams.

Many applicants are terrified at the prospect of applying for their MBA, while others approach the application process in a haphazard and ill-advised manner. For these applicants, the application process is often extremely stressful, and results can be disappointing. We truly believe that with some basic organization, a simple strategy and helpful professional guidance, the process of applying to Business School can actually be enjoyable and rewarding, not to mention successful!

This mbaMission Personal Statement Guide is part of a series of Guides we have authored – the others are the Brainstorming Guide, the Essay Outlining Guide, the Resume Guide, the Letters of Recommendation Guide and the Interview Guide. You can purchase any of these Guides on our website, or purchase the mbaMission Complete Start-to-Finish Admissions Guide for significantly less than the total cost of all the individual Guides. Visit our website, www.mbamission.com/store, for further details or to purchase a copy.

In addition to reading this e-book, we encourage you to visit our website, www.mbamission.com, which includes complete and detailed analysis of all of the top Business Schools’ essay questions, as well as a free weekly essay-writing tip. Explore our blog frequently, as we are constantly updating it and adding new, free resources.

Of course, the guides that follow and the analysis and tips posted on our website are no substitute for working with a dedicated mbaMission professional. At the end of the day, each candidate is unique. We all have distinct personal stories to tell, and we all face challenges in telling them. mbaMission professionals are specifically trained to ensure that you tell your stories in the most interesting and compelling way – and that you take advantage of even the tiniest benefit that might help you get admitted to your ideal MBA program.

We hope you enjoy this book. If you need any advice at all with respect to any element of applying to Business School, please feel free to contact us for a free consultation.

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Personal Statement

1. “Personal” is clearly the operative word in “Personal Statements.” In this “flagship” essay, you need to tell your story in a clear and compelling way, but most importantly, in an intimate way. Therefore, you cannot afford to be generic or vague. You need to discuss your past, present and future with insight and focus.
2. Context and work experience (past): The demands of personal statements vary from application to application...

Wharton:

Describe your career progress to date and your future short-term and long-term career goals. How do you expect an MBA from Wharton to help you achieve these goals and why now? (1,000 words)

Columbia:

What are your short-term and long-term post-MBA goals? How will Columbia Business School help you achieve these goals? (Recommended 750 word limit)

Chicago:

Why are you pursuing an MBA at this point in your career? Describe your personal and professional goals and the role an MBA from the University of Chicago GSB plays in your plans to reach these goals. (1,500 word maximum)

...however, all of these statements essentially place the same demands on the writer – they demand an intimate explanation of your past (work experience), your present (MBA) and your future (career goals).

Even in the case of Columbia, where there is no explicit request for information about the past, writers need to give some brief context in order to make present and future goals

relevant. One cannot just launch into a statement like “My long-term goal is to become Director of Player Personnel for the Boston Bruins.” By offering brief context about their past experience in sports management, for example, writers can turn what might have seemed like an off-the-wall claim into a reasonable, attainable goal. Context connects the past and the future.

In the examples above, Wharton and Chicago explicitly ask about your “career progress to date” and the “path that has led you to pursue an MBA,” respectively. Do not take this as an opportunity to review your entire resume – some candidates make the mistake of writing about their work experience for 75 percent of their personal statements, even though they are also submitting a resume with their application. This wastes precious essay space by reviewing facts that the Admissions Committee already has before them. The schools have your resume for a reason!

Instead, Admissions Committees are much more interested in understanding the decisions you have made and the processes through which you have grown. Your career progress should be constructed to show professional milestones and momentum toward your future career goals (unless you are a “career changer,” but even then you need to show growth and accomplishment). Your career history is a story, not a review, leading the reader to understand and admire your future goal.

3. Career Goals (future)¹: Your career goals should have a logical connection (if not a professional connection) to your context. The general idea is quite simple:

past experience + present MBA = future professional goals.

¹We have ordered this past, future, present because it is often most logical to give context and background (past), describe your goals (future) and then explain why you need the particular school's resources (present) to achieve those goals.

Your short-term career goals need to show very clear direction and purpose. It is not enough to write, “When I graduate I want to go into marketing” or “With my MBA, I will enter the field of consulting.” What kind of marketing – consumer products, business to business? 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.

4. Career Goals (future): As you develop your short-term goals, it is important that you consider the specific role they will play in enabling you to attain your long-term goals. You should demonstrate why you will excel in pursuing your long-term goals and, ideally, show insight into why the market might even need you.

For example:

“With 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 from XYZ University, 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. In my first position after earning my MBA, I see myself as 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 example above, the writer connects his/her experience as a wine journalist to his/her future as a general manager at a vineyard. S/he identifies a specific role to play and even

illustrates the logic behind this role, which is essentially “there are vineyards that desperately need professional management talent.” The reader is therefore left with a clear understanding of where this applicant is going, why this applicant will succeed and even why this applicant is needed in this field.

5. Career Goals (future): Again, there should be a cause and effect relationship between short- and long-term goals. You can take any direction that you choose from your short-term goals as long as there is a causal connection between them and your long-term goals. Also, long-term goals can be less specific than short-term goals – they essentially represent an ideal aspiration, and they assume that short-term goals will be reached.

“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 to...”

6. Why our MBA? (present): Some schools ask the generic question, “Why do you need an MBA to reach your goals?” In such cases, it is implied that the school is also asking you, “Why do you need your MBA from our school/how will you use our resources to achieve your goals?”

A common mistake among applicants is to simply flatter the school: “MIT is remarkable because of its wealth of entrepreneurial resources. I am excited to join a community of aggressive and exciting innovators.” The previous sentence is entirely generic; the writer has not offered any

insight into his/her reasoning and how s/he will utilize MIT's resources.

Instead, writers should infuse their arguments with MIT-specific information. For example, this same candidate may write:

“Because I am interested in modernizing the antiquated wine industry, I am compelled by the structure of MIT’s academic program, particularly the presence of the Sloan Innovation periods. During these week-long intensives, I will...”

In the example above, the individual is not merely flattering the school, but is explaining how this school's unique characteristics meet his/her needs – by inference, no other school can meet his/her needs, because no other school offers the Innovation periods. While you may not always find aspects of a program that are entirely unique, the key is to develop an argument that shows that you have done your homework and understand how the full complement of a school's resources come together to create a unique experience.

7. Why our MBA? (present): In longer essays (750-1,500 words), it is necessary for writers to discuss two or three key themes and give detailed explanations of exactly how they will use the school's resources to achieve their goals. For example, the writer cannot just state: “Columbia is an excellent choice for me because of its wealth of entrepreneurial programs. I also look forward to international programs at this most international of schools. Furthermore, CBS excels in finance and marketing...”

The idea is not to generate a list, but to develop a well-thought-out argument. It is almost like stating your case to a jury – prove to the Admissions Committee that by taking advantage of their 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. For example, a candidate might choose to dedicate a paragraph to CBS's entrepreneurial resources:

“One of the most appealing aspects of Columbia 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 available to test my ideas and gain frank feedback from serial entrepreneurs, which will allow me to refine my ideas and prevent mistakes. Equally important, I would aspire to enter the Entrepreneurial Greenhouse...”

8. Why our MBA? (present): It is important to show not only your academic and career fit with a certain program, but also your personal fit. If you have visited a school or spoken with alumni, students, professors or admissions staff, it can be quite helpful to mention these personal connections, so that your knowledge of the school does not seem superficial and so that your interest is sincere.

“On a personal note, I was deeply impressed by my visit to XYZ School of Business. From Professor Smith’s clever explanation of the AOL case in her ‘Acquisition Finance’ course, to the energy of students Tom Brown and Jill Johnson, who all but dragged me across the street to have coffee and share their insights, I was amazed at the dynamic feel that permeated my brief XYZ experience. I look forward to being a part of such an outgoing community, as I too...”

9. Your contribution: While some schools do not explicitly ask candidates what they can contribute, space permitting, it is wise for candidates to discuss ways in which they can contribute in class and beyond, if this has not been accomplished implicitly elsewhere in the essay. Again, candidates should be careful not to just present a list of clubs, but to truly personalize their proposed involvements in clubs and the school's broader community.

“Outside of 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, 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.”

10. Once you have completed this document, if you feel the need for additional help creating your personal statement or any other essay, or if you need any other advice at all with respect to any element of applying to Business School, please feel free to contact us for a free consultation:

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Model Personal Statement 1

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? (If you are applying for a joint or dual degree, please explain how the additional degree will contribute to those goals.) Although there is no restriction on the length of your response, most applicants use, on average, 500 words for each essay.

Note to mbaMission clients: Reading the question carefully, you will see that this essay is not asking you to recount your development over the past several years (unlike the Wharton question, see below). Therefore, it is not necessary to include your progress since college. As you can see, we do not even believe it is desirable to do so in the example below, though this would depend on personal circumstances, of course.

Completing my CPA designation at Ernst and Young's Philadelphia office in 2005, I transitioned from the Audit to the Mergers and Acquisitions Department, focusing on restructuring firms in bankruptcy protection. Before long, I negotiated the sale of a \$50MM water-bottling company to a French conglomerate, a deal that saved 250 jobs in a one-industry town. Next, I secured \$80MM for a metal recycling firm, just in time for it to catch the commodities boom. Through these and many other transactions, I found my work intellectually challenging and personally meaningful. Still, I want to achieve more – I want to secure the enduring survival of troubled firms.

My long-term career 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 acquire a struggling firm, leverage the success of this acquisition and consolidate additional firms, ultimately realizing “deep value” for investors, employees and society. To achieve this goal, upon 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. 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 a niche turnaround opportunity of my own.

While my CPA designation has facilitated specialized financial knowledge, to achieve my goal I need theoretical and practical exposure to all management disciplines. In considering MBA programs, Tuck stood out because its sole academic focus is the MBA, and the core of its MBA is general management. Tuck's core curriculum is especially compelling, not only because of its breadth, but also because of its immediate focus on management decision making via the “Analysis for General Managers” mini-course and “Leading Organizations” and “Competitive Corporate Strategy” courses. Beyond this, Tuck's practical opportunities uniquely reinforce principles of strategic thinking. Having spoken with current student John Doe, I was excited to discover that I could work with like-minded professors and peers to shape both my First Year Project and the Tuck Global Consultancy experience around my turnaround learning objectives. Through these remarkable hands-on projects, I could develop my own targeted learning principles in a “live” environment and on the global stage. Furthermore, I would seize another practical opportunity by immersing myself in the Cohen Leadership Program, where I would benefit from the consistent feedback of peers, mentors and coaches, with respect to refining my own management style.

When I visited Tuck this fall, I was struck by the fact that Tuck Connections matched me with fellow CPA Jane Doe, who not only guided me on a campus tour, but also invited me to join her study group. I had heard about Tuck's culture, but that evening I

experienced it firsthand, as I joined the vibrant discussion on “The Boeing Problem” and was challenged by the diversity of opinions represented. I was hooked. The Tuck MBA – the study groups, the small class size, the sole focus on the MBA and the warmth and dynamism of the community – create a unique learning atmosphere that will propel me into my ambitious career.

Model Personal Statement 2

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, I chose a path, after graduating in Economics from Chicago, that stunned my friends and even my family. I returned to San Antonio to join Gimli Furniture – my family firm.

While I admired my father's success in growing this high-end retail business from a one-location store into an eight-location chain, we both acknowledged that the firm needed to be reinvented. I therefore joined as Marketing Manager so I could reinvigorate our Marketing Department, which I quickly realized was stuck in the past. In my first three months, I overhauled our website and simultaneously launched e-coupons – a heresy in the high-end furniture world. Before long, we saw a surge in online and in-store traffic, as well as a sustained, 15 percent increase in monthly sales.

Building on this success, I approached my father with another unorthodox idea, but certainly one that met our goal of reinvention – expanding outside of Texas. At first he was hesitant, as he knew the local market well. He understood the potential, however, once I put together 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.

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 close to 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 unexplainable pride when my father and I cut the ribbon in Scottsdale on Labor Day 2005. Since then, Gimli-Arizona has exceeded expectations and, in two years, we have opened two more stores, all three of which are our highest grossing (by our metric of revenue per square feet). It has become quite clear to my father and me that Gimli once again has a bold future ahead of itself.

Last Thanksgiving, I returned home to San Antonio and, before I had a bite of turkey, my father started a conversation that would change my life. He told me that he was thrilled by our success and wanted me to expand Gimli into a chain across the Southwest, before turning the business over to me in a matter of years – five at the most. He had the terms sketched out in a notebook and said that, with time, he would begin a well-earned retirement and I would become President.

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 an MBA – a Wharton MBA. Only with a Wharton MBA, with its strengths in entrepreneurship, finance and family business management, will I possess the skills I need to expand Gimli into a regional chain in the short term and into a national chain thereafter.

In my case, studying entrepreneurship will be essential, as I continue to transform our entire organization. At Wharton, I would pursue the Entrepreneurial Management major, which is perfectly suited to my needs. Through courses such as “Strategies and Practices of Family-Controlled Companies” and “Legal

Issues Facing Entrepreneurs,” I will begin to lay the foundation for expanding Gimli nationally. Further, “Building Human Assets in Entrepreneurial Ventures” will enable me to tackle an ongoing challenge that we face – attracting and retaining excellent people despite our limited financial resources. Meanwhile, through the Entrepreneur in Residence Program, I will gain the feedback of experienced mentors and continue to reconsider Gimli’s long-held but possibly antiquated operating principles. Finally, via the Wharton Business Plan Competition, I would even consider testing a new concept-store targeted at a younger demographic, and I could thereby both learn about possibilities for my firm and test my entrepreneurial mettle.

While I do not intend to proceed into a classic finance-related career, finance will still be important to my education, as Gimli’s expansion will depend on large, complex financial arrangements. Thus, “Real Estate Investments” will enable me to determine if Gimli should finance its expansion 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 resources offered via the White Center and am particularly excited that the traditional focus of its annual seminar is on household financial decision making, since almost all of Gimli’s furniture is purchased for the home.

Beyond its broad course offerings, I am also drawn to Wharton 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. Wharton’s foresight in recognizing the important role that family businesses 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.

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 Prof. 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. Each student that I met in Huntsman Hall was friendly and energetic, but most of all, passionate about their studies, their future and their Wharton experience. That is what I want out of my MBA experience – I want to be equally passionate about my studies, my future career at Gimli Furniture and my MBA experience – and Wharton, more than anywhere else, will bring out that passion.

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