

# mbaMission

## Personal Statement Guide

Jeremy Shinewald

"Carrol was my MGMAT class instructor, as well as my tutor. I have worked with her since August 2007, and think she is the reason I have improved so much. She is strong because of her positivity, enthusiasm, and mastery of EVERY concept thrown her way. She had excellent explanations for MGMAT questions and questions from other sources. She did a great job of applying MGMAT strategies to all of them. She knew how to do questions in many different ways and had a strategy on hand when approaching difficult quant problems. She was very helpful to people, and could also tackle advanced algebra in a way that was understandable for quant-reliant people." "Way better than the other test prep companies. Brings to light nuances and strategies that GMAT tests for that is not covered by other companies! Even Manhattan GMAT books were way better. Also, very good that program emphasized precision to get the easy ones right and to have good reason to eliminate every choice (basically opening your third eye and being responsible)."

**"Extremely engaging"**

"A Manhattan GMAT course is worthwhile, valuable, and necessary before the test."

"The most fun you can have preparing for a test!"

"It was well balanced and offered several ways to work the material. I enjoyed the practice tests and the performance reports."

"Teaches you the foundational knowledge rather than just how to unlock the tricks."

"The instructor is very knowledgeable about the GMAT, both in quant and verbal. He has the ability to explain answers in a simplistic form."

"Sentence Correction- He did a great job of everything but he really gave us harder questions and topics in SC that have really helped improve my confidence and knowledge in this area. Enthusiasm/having fun- Steve constantly kept the class entertained by doing funny voices for hard or boring topics which made it much easier to understand those topics."

"The best GMAT prep there is."

"A great job of making sure that if there were multiple ways to get to the same answer he explained them all, including tricks and guessing strategies for questions. He really knows everything in the course from quant to CR and SC and is able to actually teach all that material. He has a great way of explaining topics in an easy to understand way and gives great feedback to students on their answers. It's not just that's the wrong answer, he really explains why it's wrong and how to do it right."

Teaching an evening class can be tough, but he always kept us on our toes. Subject matter expert - WOW! I attended a few classes with him and they were also fabulous, Eric truly impressed me with his GMAT content and strategy expertise. \*Went above and beyond - Eric was always emailing us helpful resources, and consistently demonstrated that he was willing to go above and beyond for his students (was always available before and after class to answer questions)."

"Eric is extremely enthusiastic about the courses which is very motivating to a student. He covers all the material, and helps students with many problems. He seems genuinely interested in helping students and is extremely helpful, organized, and accommodating."

"I would highly recommend"

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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 clients to discover, select and articulate the unique stories that will force admissions committees to take notice. We work on 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 candidates a free half-hour consultation ([www.mbamission.com/consult.php](http://www.mbamission.com/consult.php)).*

## About the Author

Before founding mbaMission, **Jeremy Shinewald** was chief 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. After graduation, Jeremy formally established mbaMission and has subsequently provided admissions consulting services to applicants from the United States and more than 25 other countries on six continents. Jeremy is a 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.

# Introduction

After more than a decade of helping 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. We always work closely and meticulously with our clients to ensure their unique stories and qualities shine through in their applications, but some of our advice boils down to key fundamentals: approach each essay with a brainstorming session, draft outlines for your essays, 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 and others in this series, we offer you our thoughts on these subjects so that you can begin your journey toward the MBA of your dreams.

Many applicants find the prospect of applying to business school overwhelming, if not outright terrifying, and some approach their applications in a haphazard and ill-advised manner. As a result, the process often becomes extremely stressful, and can yield disappointing results. However, we truly believe that with some basic organization, a simple strategy and helpful professional guidance, applying to business school can actually be enjoyable and rewarding, not to mention successful!

We encourage you to visit our Web site, [www.mbamission.com](http://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 a free weekly essay writing tip, lesser-known facts about the leading MBA programs and exclusive interviews with admissions directors. Explore our blog 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 tell your stories in the most interesting and compelling way and to guide you in taking advantage of every opportunity that might help you gain admission 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.

## **Jeremy Shinewald**

*info@mbamission.com*

*www.mbamission.com*

*646-485-8844*

*Skype: mbaMission*

**The following guides are also available from mbaMission (online at [www.mbamission.com/store.php](http://www.mbamission.com/store.php)), and more are being added regularly:**

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mbaMission Insider's Guide to the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania

mbaMission Insider's Guide to the Yale School of Management

# Personal Statement

## Introduction

Virtually all top business schools—with some notable exceptions—ask applicants for a personal statement in which candidates discuss their goals and ambitions as they pertain to the 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 that also reveals your personality and individuality. You cannot afford to be generic or vague when stating your goals or the reasons why you want to attend a certain school. Instead, you must write with purpose and conviction to impress upon 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, next describe your goals and then explain why you need the particular school’s resources to achieve those goals. Convincingly explaining why a school’s resources are required to help you achieve your goals would be quite challenging if you have not first stated what those goals are.

## Past: Context and Work Experience

In recent years, top MBA programs have been de-emphasizing work history to some degree in the personal statement. 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?” In conversations with admissions officers, mbaMission has come to understand that many felt that the resume, recommendations, other essays and interview provide sufficient information about a candidate’s background and that a work history was increasingly unnecessary. Still, some personal statement questions follow this traditional approach, as is the case with Kellogg:

*Northwestern University (Kellogg): Briefly assess your career progress to date. Elaborate on your future career plans and your motivation for pursuing a graduate degree at Kellogg. (600-word limit; 2009–2010 essay question)*

Meanwhile, others—such as those for Columbia Business School and the University of Michigan (Ross), which follow—do not explicitly ask you to discuss past experiences, but providing some basic context for your goals is still important.

*Columbia Business School: 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; 2009–2010 essay question)*

*University of Michigan (Ross): Briefly describe your short-term and long-term career goals. Why is an MBA the best choice at this point in your career? What and/or who influenced your decision to apply to Ross? (500-word maximum; 2009–2010 essay question)*

If a school explicitly asks you to discuss your “career progress to date,” do not take this as an opportunity to offer every accomplishment on your resume. Some candidates make the mistake of writing about their work experience for 75% of their personal statements, even though they are also submitting a resume with their application. This wastes precious essay space by repeating facts the admissions committee already has elsewhere. We recommend limiting your discussion of your career history 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 such as “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 the candidate also offers information about his/her past experience in sports management. Context connects the past and the future. With questions like Columbia’s and Ross’s, candidates should limit their career history to 50–125 words—or approximately 10%–15% of the total allowed word count—of context, so the 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 future career goals. Your career history in this context is not meant to be a full review of your professional past, but rather a story that leads the reader to understand and admire your future 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 someone who plans to continue working within the same industry or job function after business school. However, you still need to show growth and accomplishment



and highlight capabilities and knowledge. Emphasize the aspects of your career to date that are most relevant to your future 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.

## Future: Career Goals

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

$$\textit{past experience} + \textit{present MBA} = \textit{future professional goals.}$$

## Short-Term Goals

Your short-term career 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*” is not enough. 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. As you develop your short-term goals, you must 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 goals 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 from Shinerwald 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. 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 connects his/her experience as a wine journalist to his/her future as a general manager at a vineyard. He/she 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 this applicant will succeed and even why this applicant is needed in this field.

### **Avoid Generic Statements**

Declaring “I want to be a banker” or “I want to be a consultant” without any further clarification simply is not sufficient—you must explain as specifically as possible what you envision yourself doing after business school. For example, within the consulting industry, you will find many different “types” of consultants: marketing consultants, operational consultants, strategy consultants, technology consultants, small business consultants—even admissions consultants! Thus, 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.

In contrast, consider this short-term goal statement:

*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.

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—under certain circumstances, offering alternatives for your short-term goals can be acceptable. (Note, of course, that alternate paths still need to involve a logical connection from past to present to future.) Consider the following example of offering alternative goals:

*In the long term, I would like to head a nonprofit organization that focuses on offering career guidance 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 indeed quite serious about his/her long-term goals—so much so that he/she can envision at least two feasible routes toward them. Again, admissions committees want to understand that you are resolved about your future plans 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, first 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. While 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 (which continues from the one offered in the Short-Term Goals section):

*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**

As stated, you must be sure to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between your short- and long-term goals. While your goals can and should be whatever you desire for yourself (admissions committees do not have a “right” goal in mind that they expect from candidates) and may even seem quite disconnected from each other at first glance, this is fine as long as a causal connection exists—and is shown—between your short-term goals and your long-term goals. 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 such as “*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. Most short- and long-term goals can connect in some way. Equity research can be a foundation for consulting, for example, and marketing can be a basis for entrepreneurship. Generally, the goals themselves are not that relevant—the rationale behind these goals is what is vital. If the goals are well connected, they will be “real.”

Moreover, given that these are your 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 a candidate’s application package should support the same career vision—including one’s interview with the school, if applicable—presenting false goals here can jeopardize the applicant’s 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 therefore tell when a candidate is being sincere and when he/she is just trying to say the “right” thing. Besides, writing the truth is not just more effective, it is much easier.

### **Present: Why Our MBA?**

Perhaps above all else, schools want to hear very compelling reasons for each candidate’s need for their particular program’s MBA. 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: “Ross is remarkable because of its wealth of entrepreneurial resources. I am excited to join a community of aggressive and exciting innovators.” This sentence is entirely generic; the writer has not offered any insight into his/her reasoning or into how he/she will use particular Ross resources. Instead, infuse your arguments with school-specific information. For example, this same candidate would be 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, particularly its Multidisciplinary Action Project (MAP) course. During this seven-week hands-on experience on-site at a company, I expect to face “live” challenges and deliver targeted solutions, with the help of peers and advisors, meeting the high-level expectations of a major firm—the ideal training ground for facing a host of 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 his/her specific needs—by inference, no other school can fulfill these needs, because no other school offers the MAP. While 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 show 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?

### **Two to Three Themes**

In longer essays (750–1,000 words), candidates must 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, he/she

cannot simply 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 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. 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.*

### **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 or admissions staff, mentioning these personal connections can be quite helpful. Your knowledge of the school will seem more substantial, and your interest will be seen as sincere. Note how the candidate mentions several firsthand experiences with the school in the following example:

*I was deeply impressed by my visit to the Shinewald School of Business. From Professor Amanda 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 Shinewald experience. I look forward to being a part of such an outgoing 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 coursework; or even personal characteristics like enthusiasm or humor, which may facilitate bonding between classmates. Be careful to not

just present a list of clubs, for example, 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 the essay. Here is one example of how to address one's contributions:

*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 sacrifice 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

- A) 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. (2009–2010 question)

*After completing my CPA designation at Ernst and Young's Philadelphia office in 2006, 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*

<sup>1</sup>If you read the question carefully, you will see that it is not asking you to recount your development over the past several years (unlike the question in Sample Personal Statement B). Therefore, you do not need to discuss your progress since college. You just need to provide brief context.

<sup>2</sup>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.

<sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>By revealing a priori experience with the school, the candidate emphasizes his interest and his fit with its MBA program. It is important that you 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.

*saved 250 jobs in a one-industry town. Next, I secured \$80M for a metal recycling firm, just in time for the commodities boom. Because of such transactions, I found my work intellectually challenging and personally meaningful.<sup>1</sup> 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 purchase a struggling firm, leverage this acquisition’s success and consolidate additional firms, ultimately realizing “deep value” for investors, employees and society.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 to achieve my goal I need theoretical and practical exposure to all management disciplines. Tuck stands out for me among MBA programs because its sole academic focus is the MBA, and the core of its program 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 the “Leading Organizations” and “Competitive Corporate Strategy” courses. 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 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 immerse myself in the Cohen Leadership Program to benefit from the consistent feedback of peers, mentors and coaches, with respect to refining my management style.<sup>4</sup>*

*When I visited Tuck this fall, Tuck Connections matched me with fellow CPA Jane Doe, who guided me on a campus tour and then invited me to join her study group. I had heard about Tuck’s culture, but that evening I experienced it firsthand by joining a vibrant discussion on “The Boeing Problem” and being challenged by the diversity of opinions represented. I was hooked. Tuck’s MBA program—the study groups, small class size, sole focus on the MBA and the warmth and dynamism of the community—provides a unique learning atmosphere that will propel me into my ambitious career.<sup>5</sup>*



- B) 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; 2008–2009 question)

*Declining an offer from a Wall Street investment bank after graduating with a degree in Economics from Chicago, 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 e-coupons—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.<sup>1</sup>*

*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.*

*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 2005. Since then, Gimli-Arizona has exceeded expectations, and within two years, we opened two more stores; now these three are our highest grossing (by our metric of revenue per square feet). My father and I clearly see that Gimli once again has a bold future ahead.*

*Last 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.<sup>2</sup> 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*

<sup>1</sup>When discussing a family business, it is important for candidates to show that they have made the most of the opportunity and have had an impact of their own on the organization.

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

*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 expand Gimli into a regional chain in the short term and into a national chain thereafter.<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup>The writer clearly states why he is pursuing an MBA.

*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 both learn about possibilities for my firm and test my entrepreneurial mettle.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>4</sup>Because the word limit for this essay is larger than that for Sample Personal Statement A, this 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.

*While I do not intend to proceed into a classic finance-related 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 enable me to 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 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 Gimli’s furniture is purchased for the home.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup>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 fulfill that need.

*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.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>6</sup>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!

*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 equally 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.<sup>7</sup>*

- C)
- Briefly describe your short-term and long-term career goals.
  - Why is an MBA the best choice at this point in your career?
  - What and/or who influenced your decision to apply to Ross? (500-word maximum total; 2009–2010 question)

*“Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does,” warned an attention-grabbing Dove advertisement. When Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty, I witnessed its impact firsthand, as it ignited passionate conversations on body-image issues among my friends. After four years developing film trailers, posters and merchandise for feature releases as an associate at Bohemia, a boutique entertainment marketing firm, I felt the need to pursue a path that would allow me to have a greater and more meaningful influence on others.*

*Seeking to remain in marketing, I began to pursue informational interviews, eventually landing one with a product director at Dove. I was amazed at the detailed information Dove had collected through its interactive media campaigns, as it strived to reach millions of “daughters” first.<sup>1</sup> I am now inspired to join a socially conscious firm as a brand manager to help solve the puzzle that is the consumer while simultaneously promoting a healthy lifestyle. In this role, I would be steadily promoted and ultimately manage multiple brands, learning about unique marketing challenges and the rapidly evolving, data-driven market at each step.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, I plan to start my own marketing consulting firm, using my corporate experience and MBA training to help small socially aware firms carve out their niches. At Bohemia, I have seen small films emerge as blockbusters—as an entrepreneur, I will help companies create blockbuster consumer products.<sup>3</sup>*

*Ross’s general management approach appeals to me because I know that marketing is often complexly intertwined with operations and finance. Professor Christie Nordheim’s “Big Picture” marketing course will teach me key frameworks to structure my approach to developing strategies and communications plans for both new and established consumer products. In Professor Terry Duncan’s “Leveraging Marketing in Industrial Design” class, I will learn to unify consumer data and influence design, tailoring products to consumer needs. When I visited Ross in October 2009, I attended the Marketing Symposium and was impressed with the student participants’ depth of knowledge and the content of the panel discussions—from social marketing to design to advertising and branding. At Ross, I could clearly “live” marketing both inside and outside the classroom.<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> For this essay, a comprehensive work history is neither requested nor appropriate, so the writer provides just enough background information to serve as context for the “Why an MBA?” and “What influenced your decision?” portions of her response.

<sup>2</sup> Here the specificity of the candidate’s goal shows that she has direction and focus—she is not just seeking a marketing position, she is targeting a brand manager role in a socially conscious firm that promotes a healthy lifestyle.

<sup>3</sup> The candidate’s long-term goals are ambitious, yet realistic.

<sup>4</sup> By making note of specific resources at the school and relating them to her stated goals, the candidate helps establish her credibility with the reader.

*On campus, I also met Edward Thompson, president of Net Impact, and am excited about the strength of this chapter. Joining this group and participating in its annual symposium and Social Intrapreneurs Alumni Panel would certainly be professionally valuable, but just a side benefit of contributing to this important organization and establishing enduring friendships with classmates. In addition to joining the Marketing and Entertainment and Media clubs, which intellectually interest me, I plan to contribute my creative talents to videos and skits for Rock 'n' Roll B-School and Ross Follies. I have seen firsthand that Ross has an engaged community of students, professors and administration, and I know I truly fit this environment. I hope to assume leadership roles and make an impact at the school, just as I intend to make an impact in my career, benefitting companies and consumers alike.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup>In this paragraph, the writer reinforces what Ross offers in her spheres of interest—marketing and socially oriented business—while also revealing her personal fit with the school and a desire to contribute to the Ross community.

- D) How did you choose your most recent job/internship and how did this experience influence your future goals? What about the Chicago Booth MBA makes you feel it is the next best step in your career at this time? (750–1,000 words; 2009–2010 question)

*In a gripping 15-minute meeting, armed with just five PowerPoint slides, I informed my managing director that he was emphasizing the wrong things in our new organization and needed to start focusing on people. I suggested he hire me as an HR strategy manager to help fix this problem. In this role, I would coordinate training initiatives firm-wide, develop process improvements to reduce non-value-added work and help management address other urgent strategic HR challenges.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>The candidate uses an engaging narrative opening to capture the reader's interest, rather than simply presenting bullets from her resume about her most recent promotion.

*After my boss had agreed to my new role and the modest raise I had also requested, I took a breath and considered what I had accomplished. I had been managing Jedang's expatriate hiring program and English language training initiatives in Bangkok and had already hired ten employees who were flourishing within the company when, unexpectedly, Adroitte Consulting suddenly acquired the firm. With the advent of new international standards, management rushed to bring everyone up to speed on the new regulations and client service guidelines. Added demands and pressure from the top were taking a toll on my already overworked Thai colleagues, and I could no longer just sit by and watch. Only after the meeting did I realize how much courage it had taken to confront my boss; luckily, he had graciously welcomed my feedback.*

*During the next six months, I was immersed in the five-year strategic planning process for the entire organization. For two weeks in particular, the managing directors of the five service divisions and I burned the midnight oil, crafting the firm's major goals and a corporate growth framework. Given my Thai and English language abilities, I managed the creation of the firm's Five-Year Strategic Action Plan. My personal passion for employee growth and development led me to emphasize employee satisfaction as a key metric of the plan's success, and I outlined milestones and actions to reach that goal.*

*To persuade the team to include HR goals in the strategic plan, I used analyses of employee satisfaction numbers, something my mentor, David Nguyen,<sup>2</sup> a 1978 Chicago Booth alumnus and now CEO of the new Adroitte Thailand, encouraged me to do. On the surface, employee satisfaction numbers were weak, but the rate of change—the second derivative of employee satisfaction—painted an even bleaker picture. Overall approval had declined an alarming 10% in the previous six months, versus 6% in the previous three years combined. The second derivative always tells the truth, David had taught me. Using this data, I convinced the strategic action plan committee to eliminate mandatory Saturday workdays, hold monthly town hall meetings and implement process improvements to reduce overwork—productivity and employee happiness quickly began to rise.*

*Profoundly influencing the decisions of an enormous multinational corporation was very inspiring. I want to reach other organizations in this way and use my belief in employee empowerment and fulfillment to transform how companies engage with their employees. To extend my reach and maximize my effectiveness, I will need an MBA.*

*I ultimately see myself moving into HR consulting and will likely join an HR consulting firm post graduation to gain more hands-on experience in managing change in large organizations. However, I may first work as a strategy management consultant to deepen my understanding of the range of strategic business issues and their resolution before specializing in HR consulting. As an HR consultant, I will help companies restructure their organizations to ensure that employees have fulfilling career paths and appropriate work-life balance.<sup>3</sup>*

*In talking with David about Chicago Booth, I came to see how the school's rigorous academic environment, culture of challenging the obvious and emphasis on advanced economics as the foundation for all good business decisions shaped his view of industry and his place in it. He credits the program with providing the tools and network he needed to build his career. To realize my goals in the HR arena, I aim to follow in his footsteps.*

*Beyond the important foundational courses "Microeconomics"—which I hope to take with Kevin Murphy to give my initial economic insight training an extra boost—"Corporate Finance" and "Managerial Decision-Making," the classes "Managing in Organizations" and "Strategic Management" seem uniquely tailored to my needs. They will teach me to explore frameworks for organizational design and people management, thus equipping me to advise future clients in these areas. And after gaining a solid foundation in management essentials—accounting, economics, corporate finance, statistics—I will concentrate in organizational behavior to explore people-organization relationships in depth.*

*Chicago Booth is also ideal for my needs because of the ample opportunities available to start implementing the lessons of the MBA classroom in the field through the student groups that engage local businesses in an advisory capacity. Via the Business Solutions Group in particular, I hope to consult to a small Chicago business*

<sup>2</sup> Here the candidate shows an important personal connection to the school. The "name dropping" in this context is not forced or for show—this person has played a significant role in the candidate's professional success and also in her interest in Chicago Booth in particular.

<sup>3</sup> The school's question is rather vague with respect to the candidate's ambitions—asking generally about "future goals" but not specifically for short- or long-term plans. So, the candidate justifiably does not offer detailed intentions but still shows purpose and thoughtfulness in moving in a particular direction in her career.

*or nonprofit to gain insight into the hands-on challenges of real client management as well as the myriad facets of a business that determine and are affected by strategic HR management. Such opportunities will not only cement classroom learnings, but also provide me with the softer, more ephemeral skills that can truly only be gained hands-on.*

*I am especially looking forward to participating in the greater Chicago Booth community. While visiting the school, I spoke with second year Amy Smart, who told me about the many opportunities to bond with fellow classmates and form lasting relationships through team-building and social activities, such as the LEAD program and weekly Happy Hour. I know the connections I will form with my LEAD teammates will extend well into my career. Also, with my extensive background in theater and film production, I hope to participate in and help produce Follies, enjoying with my classmates the shared creative process that a stage production uniquely offers.<sup>4</sup>*

*With a Chicago Booth MBA, I will clearly be well positioned to succeed in a career in strategic HR management and consulting. The challenge, rigor and growth I will experience both inside and outside the classroom will enable me to more significantly influence organizations and the way they manage their employees.*

## **A Special Focus on Career Changers**

As we noted earlier in this guide, 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. To help with this, we have created a worksheet, whose purpose is to 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.

<sup>4</sup>Here the candidate demonstrates indisputably that she “knows” Chicago Booth and has made a personal connection with the school. If you were to remove the Chicago Booth name, the essay would no longer make sense—thus proving that the essay is not generic but specific to this one school alone.



A completed sample worksheet, as well as a blank one, appear at the end of this document for use in helping you narrow in on your goals. 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 you keep 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 achieved 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 already possess*. 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’s 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.

If you feel the need for additional help creating your personal statement or any other essay, or if you need advice on any other element of applying to business school, please contact us for a free consultation ([www.mbamission.com/consult.php](http://www.mbamission.com/consult.php)).



## 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"> <li>• English, Chinese</li> <li>• Operations experience in China</li> <li>• Empathy/ no judgment (childhood perspective)</li> <li>• Leading team at work; developed motivation skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteer, Consulting Club = firsthand knowledge</li> <li>• Finance skills – Finance Club</li> <li>• Alumni network</li> <li>• Take electives on HR challenges in other countries</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work for Bain/BCG in China, Ops division</li> <li>• Find mentor I can learn motivation skills from</li> <li>• Improve operational knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consulting and teaching skills</li> <li>• Languages (English, Chinese, Indonesian)</li> <li>• Finance skills</li> <li>• Motivational techniques</li> <li>• Ability to suspend judgment, empathy</li> <li>• HR tools &amp; knowledge</li> <li>• Operations experience</li> </ul>

## 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.

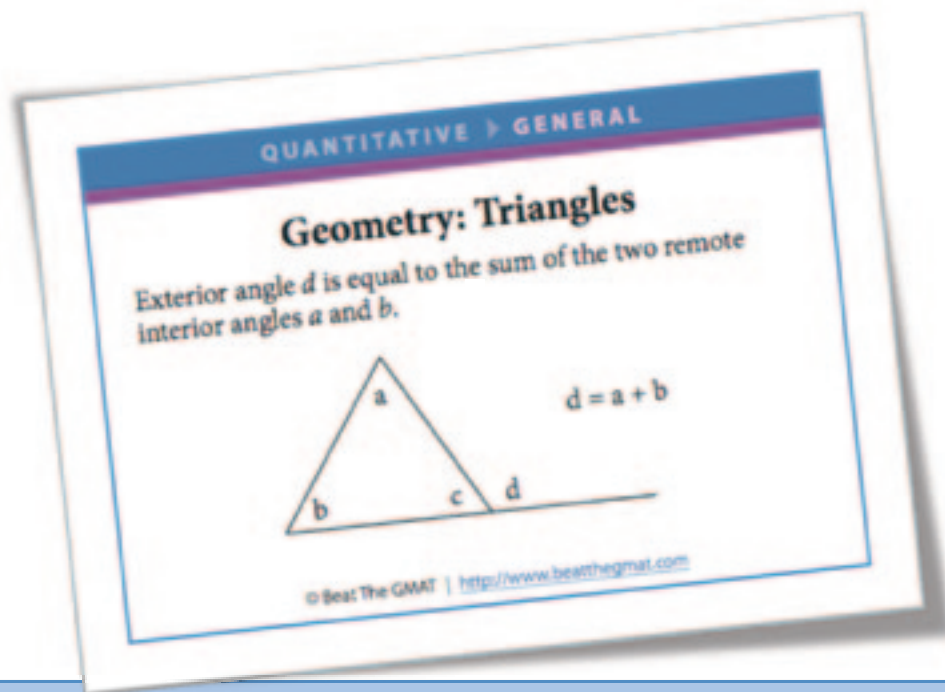
**Box H:** Enter a summary statement of your short-term goal.

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[www.mbamission.com](http://www.mbamission.com)

[info@mbamission.com](mailto:info@mbamission.com)

646-485-8844

Skype: mbaMission