



Tips on Getting Into Harvard

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I am a Harvard graduate, and can openly say that attending Harvard for four years was one of the best experiences of my, albeit short, life. Below are my thoughts on where you should focus your attention when applying.

In high school, a lot of students focus on grades and standardized test scores alone as their path to college. "Get good grades, score well on the SAT, and I'll be well on my way," most think. But that's simply not true when it comes to top American universities. There are more than enough applicants with a 4.0 GPA and high test scores to choose from. There must, then, be something else that separates those who get in and those who do not. That something is what I call the application "story"--the two or three items that make you interesting as an individual beyond being a good person and a good student.

Do you have a story or two that would pique the interest of a random stranger you met at a coffee shop? If the answer to this question is 'no,' then how do you expect to pique the interest of an admissions officer who is reading 20 such stories a day for three months straight? You're not. Plain and simple, you need that "story". If you don't have one yet, don't worry, because with enough time and persistence you can make one of your own.

My Story

For some people their story is obvious. While at Harvard I had a roommate whose company was featured in the Wall Street Journal, a lab partner who had toured the world playing his cello for the world's top conductors, and my class featured several Olympians. Most of us cannot compete with these sorts of stories and the good news is that we don't have to. My accomplishments did not hold a match to the ones listed above, but I was able to successfully demonstrate that I was passionate and hard working and that had my roommate, lab partner, and Olympian classmates all met randomly at a cafe to chit-chat, they would likely be interested in what I had to say as well. I can't tell you what your story should be, but I can tell you what mine was.

My first story was that I excelled at math and loved everything computers and science. I took this love beyond the classroom and my Junior year, with the help of my parents, worked as an intern at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. There I was a part of the Mars Exploration Rover team (the not-so-little robots they sent up to Mars, looking for water). I did odd jobs in the lab which involved a little programming but mostly gave the real project engineers an extra set of hands when they needed them. I was in the testing lab when the satellites launched into space ("JPL are you go, no-go for launch?" .. "JPL is go for launch!") and I helped out when the group did their first test run (simulated a full Mars day). I wasn't even close to an integral part of the project, but it was a great experience and I made it clear to Harvard that I planned to have more experiences like this, hopefully with their help.

The other part of my story was about determination. I'm fairly short and am average when it comes to athletic ability. But I was a starter on a league champion water polo team which reached our division's semi-finals in the playoffs. I wrote about my favorite memory of the season: watching a group of three men, all almost a foot taller than me, cry after we had handed them their asses in the the division's quarter-finals. We were outmatched physically, but we were better prepared, more confident, and believed in each other. I wanted Harvard to know that I would do everything in my power to win and losing is not an option. You will find both essays at this document's end.

A small note on essays: your essays should do more than just answer the question at hand. One of the weak points in my resume was writing. So I made sure that my essays were well written by putting in the time and by asking every good writer I knew to make comments and give suggestions. On paper I was a nerd, but I didn't see myself as one and I wanted to make sure that came across in my writing and my application essays. I included references from pop culture, small jokes to lighten my image and make myself seem more well-rounded than my grades and test score had made me seem.

Lastly, your recommendations are extremely important. There isn't a single admissions officer who will tell you otherwise. These are also the parts of your application that you have the least control over (you don't even get to see them before they are sent). Your recommendations

should be written by someone who is more than just a teacher or mentor. She should know about your extracurricular activities, be witness to your actions and personality outside of school grounds, and most importantly, care about you. You want your letter writers to have a personal interest in your success. Those who wrote my recommendations bragged after the fact that I was one of their best students and that they had been a part of my success. And they were absolutely right about that. I have no way of proving this, but I would bet that more time was put into my recommendation letter than others. The reason for that is I put in the time to cultivate that relationship over the years I spent in high school. You can not expect to ask your teacher to write a recommendation for you and have it be the best recommendation letter she has ever written. You need to cultivate that relationship over a couple years to insure the relationship spans beyond the classroom.

Even those who know you well will not remember everything you have accomplished over the past four years in high school. When asking for a recommendation include a packet to help jog your mentor's memory. I included a resume, a few short paragraphs on my hopes, aspirations, and strengths. All of my recommendation writers were painfully aware of my awards, internships, and extra curricular activities because I neatly organized all of this information for them in a binder with "David's College Recommendation Letter Packet" written in large letters on the front. Be courteous and respectful in your request, but there is no need to be bashful or modest--this is your time to shine!

So to recap, you need the complete story. What was my story?

- Top grades, top SAT scores, and top AP scores especially in math and science where I excelled
- A passion for math and science that went beyond the classroom - internship at JPL and side projects in programming
- A need to be the best and succeed as exemplified by one of my personal essays
- Glowing recommendations by teachers and mentors with whom I had deep relationships

Make Your Own Story

“That’s all good and well, David,” you may say, “but I have no story and have no idea of how to make one.” Creating a story take time and persistence, and with these two in hand, I’m confident that a majority of 18 year-olds are capable of creating the type of story that makes them interesting, engaging, and unique in the eyes of others.

Everyone knows that extra curricular activities are important in the college application process. Most engage in the usual after-school clubs, or volunteering at the local hospital. Online forums are littered with posts about 500 or more hours spent as a volunteer at local clinics, foundations, and hospitals. But the fact of the matter is that those types of accomplishments aren’t very interesting. They aren’t very interesting because the opportunities are open to everyone, and every applicant with even the slightest amount of drive will have thought of and participated in activities such as this.

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