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.

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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 is 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 do not have one yet, do not 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 do not 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 cannot 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 programing 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 was not 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 am fairly short and am average when it comes to athletic ability. But I was a starter on a league champion waterpolo 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 did not 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 is not 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 do not 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 extra-curricular 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 ensure 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 extracurricular 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
exceded
• 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 well and good, David,” you may say, “but I have no story and have no idea of how to make one.” Creating a story takes time and persistence, and with these two in hand, I am 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 are not very interesting. They are not 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. A solution to this problem is not to add as many hours as possible to your list of accomplishments. The solution is to spend your time following your passions, doing things others have not thought of doing.

It is much more interesting to shadow a doctor and be in the operating room than it is to volunteer at the local hospital. It is much more interesting to start your own foundation and raise $3,500 in donations than it is to work at a local charity. It is much more interesting to work in a research lab the local university—and maybe get your name on a published paper—than it is to be president of the Biology club at school. It is much more interesting to make your own website that provides some monthly income than it is to work for Best Buy’s Geek Squad. These are not made up opportunities either—they are abbreviated stories that I have heard from friends and colleagues while at Harvard. They all had unique stories and so can you; the real question is
One of the best pieces of advice I have ever been offered is, “If you don’t ask, you’ll never know.” You would be surprised how far you can get by just asking for what you want. Plenty of people will reject you and tell you outright, “No,” but every once in a while you will find someone willing to take a chance on you. One in fifty may say yes, but you only need one or two of these unique opportunities to make your story stand out.

So if your passion really is biology, write a short, personal, and respectful email to the twenty professors doing the research you think is cool at your local university. For the ones who do not respond within a week, follow up with another email containing even more information about yourself. Even better, get yourself to the campus, ask students where the Biology building is, and drop in on professors who have their door open. Explain that you are a very hard working high school student and all you want is a chance to work in a real lab. For most professors, the number of high school students who have just “popped in” looking for a research opportunity is zero. You are already special by taking this step. Being special in this outstanding way can go a long way in helping you achieve your goals by opening doors.

If theatre is your passion, make sure you do the most you can possibly do with your school’s thespian group. But also go to a local production company, and offer to help the stage manager for free as an intern. Get your name in the program. You will be able to write about your experience as the stage manager’s assistant for a production that performed for a month straight and grossed $100,000 for the theater company. If you are able to send the prospective college supplemental material, send the glossy program on which your name should be circled in bright red pen. Be proud of your accomplishments, there is no room for modesty in a college application.

The one thing to remember when trying to get your foot in the door is that rejection is the norm and not the exception. You should approach the situation without a shred of doubt that you will succeed, but if you are rejected (and this will inevitably happen) do not be surprised. Continue on to the next opportunity with the same amount of confidence. As a rough measure of whether or not the opportunity you seek is worth while, if you are not being rejected frequently, you are not being ambitious enough.
Recap time! How do you make your own story?

- Be aggressive. No one is going to hand you an amazing opportunity that you can then turn into an even more impressive essay. Fight for what you want. Keep sending emails and knocking on doors. Talk to 1,000 people if you have to.

- You will never know if you do not ask. Be respectful and courteous, but do not be afraid to ask for an opportunity that may feel far out of reach.

- If an opportunity is available to anyone who wants it, you should focus your time on something else.

The Interview

Many top tier universities will ask you to interview with an alumnus. I do not think these interviews are important in the sense that they will not be the reason you are accepted. But I think they could be the reason you are not accepted, and in my experience, bright, enthusiastic, and charismatic high school kids do a lot to mess this step up.

Your interviewer is just that, your interviewer. She is not your mentor, or your soccer coach, or your best friend. So do not treat her in this way. Be open about your interests, put a positive spin on your faults, and go ahead and Google her to get a better idea of who you will be talking to. But do not ask her how you should be writing your resume or how long it should be. Do not ask her to proofread your essay for AP Literature. Do not invite her to dinner later on in the week. When asked what your weaknesses are--standard interview question--do not respond with, “I don’t have any.”

Bring a resume to the interview that will remind the interviewer of your main accomplishments. It should be a single page, use a standard format (these formats can be found online or right inside Microsoft Word), and make sure to proofread it. Dress nicer than you would for school (business casual), shave, take a shower, and look presentable. Firm handshake, standard introduction, leave the “ums” and “likes” at home. Write a short thank you letter after you get
back from your interview. Simple and common sense stuff, but you would be amazed at how often this is not followed.

If you have never had a real, professional interview before, hop online and Google “Interview questions.” Make sure that you have answers to common ones that seem applicable to the situation. Some common questions that are almost always asked:

- What do you consider your strengths?
- What is your greatest weakness?
- Why do you want to go to Harvard? (The answer to this should be something specific. An elaboration of “because it’s a good school and I want to go to college” does not work)
- Can you tell me about a time that you failed to reach your goal? What did you learn?
- Questions to elaborate on your extra-curriculars.
- Questions to elaborate on your summer internships (if you have had any).

You will want to practice before going to the interview. It can be very surprising what terrible things can spill out of your mouth when you are doing this off the cuff. Under no circumstances do you want to make yourself look bad. Nothing disparaging or self-deprecating should leave your mouth. Everything you say should be positive and genuine. Even your greatest weakness can turn into a positive if spun the right way.

**Essays**

As I mentioned earlier, essays are very important. They bring personality and identity to an application that is mostly a collection of grades, rankings, and personal accomplishments. The essays give your application a voice, and without a strong voice you are not going to get in.

Remember that you want your application to show the admissions committee how well rounded and interesting an individual you are. Try to subtly address any weaknesses you may have in your essays. My weaknesses were in English and writing, so I made sure that my essays were very well written with no grammatical mistakes. And please make sure to proofread your work. Again, common sense stuff, but you would be surprised how many people do not follow this line of thought.
Below are two of the essays I submitted with my application, exactly as I wrote them.
Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

For ten weeks this summer I worked in NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) “sandbox”: a fifteen by thirty-meter room filled with volcanic rocks and flooded with bright, high frequency lights to simulate the Martian surface. My second day on the job finds me reading over the “Mars Rover Mission Plan.” The document is over a thousand pages, but by the end of the day I come upon the project’s concluding summary. And what I read is absolutely amazing. The summary outlines the flight technically: carefully stowed inside a Delta-II rocket the Rover will travel a three-hundred-eleven-million-mile journey at an average speed of sixty thousand miles per hour over seven months. Upon landing, the Rover, commanded from JPL, will carry out extremely complex scientific experiments and will send the data back to Earth via an antenna smaller than the size of a dinner plate. A feeling of ecstasy overtakes me when I realize that I will be working on the Rovers, touching, testing, and calibrating every intricate part.

As time continues, though, the attitude around the Lab is what begins to have the greatest impact on me—the fact that a portable science lab will soon be conducting experiments on the surface of Mars is treated as commonplace by the Mars Exploration Rover(MER) team. Some actually grumble that the Rovers could be doing more. What is a game to these engineers is complete and utter magic to the outside world. This “amazing group of individuals,” as I once heard a newscaster describe the engineers at JPL and NASA, resembles more a group of small boys playing with their remote controlled cars than adults forging the keys to unlocking the mysteries of space. Everyone at JPL is so confident in his abilities that the attitude around the lab is beyond nonchalant: voices are never raised, deadlines seem to come and go, and no one is ever in a hurry.

Standing in the Mission Control room I witness this environment firsthand. A file that holds a command to fire the rocket boosters for a trajectory change cannot be found on the network. A failure to upload the command in time will send the Rovers millions of miles away from Mars. The mission controller fervently repeats the file name only to hear repeatedly that it is not there. Like in a James Bond movie the command transmitted successfully with only a few minutes to spare and like Bond there was never an inkling of doubt in the minds of these people; not a
single person at JPL knows the meaning of “cannot do.” At the end, there is no applause, not even discussion on the matter. In fact, the mission controller is more concerned with finding sugar and cream for his coffee.

I begin to understand the advantages of a calm attitude towards work after my first SORT. SORT stands for the Surface Operations Rehearsal Test—a simulation of real Mars operations. Looking at my watch at the end of the day, I realize that problem after problem has kept my partner and me there until three in the morning. The day had been like a replica of an 80’s horror movie where a once obedient robot obtains a mind of its own and begins to rebel. And the game begins: us against the robot. It is a battle of wits, with the Rover trying to obtain its independence and my partner and I attempting to trick it back into obedience with sophisticated software wizardry. Every time I would try to reset the Rover’s memory or recycle power to the main circuit boards, I was fully prepared to hear, as in Kubrik’s Odyssey 2001, “I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Our trickery prevails and at three in the morning the struggle ends; we win.

The SORT changed my attitude towards work. I have become very results-oriented since then. The experience in the control room and with my partner in the sandbox have taught me that it is foolish to get hung up on every little problem because nothing will ever get done that way. If the scientists and engineers at NASA and JPL had worried about every “what-if” situation before they began a project, we would never have had a Moon landing, let alone a space program! The idea must have sounded ridiculous when it was first proposed, yet a group of very dedicated people decided to step forward with their minds instead of their fears. JPL was an extraordinary experience. It taught me the importance of having a vision or a goal coupled with a gut-level determination. These, I found, were vital to navigating the pathway to success.
Outside of academics, what do you enjoy doing most? What do you find most challenging?

Most who have not seen me play water polo would describe me as a calm, good-natured young man with soft, blue eyes and an innocent smile. To them my personal flare would be found in learning, and, if not that, then definitely not in something as aggressive and bloodthirsty as the sport of water polo. Yet, as soon as my body enters a pool, the nice, curly-haired, academic me turns into a scraggly-haired, competitive combatant—somewhat like the transformation of Dr. Bruce Banner into the Incredible Hulk from the comic books I read as a little kid. With strands of hair protruding into every direction, my grasp of the English language vanishes and communication shifts into a pattern of barks, yells, and whistles, each with a different meaning. Many a time I’ve been told by an opponent that I seemed much bigger in the water, as he pinches his nose to stop the bleeding I have caused or ices an already appearing black eye that I inflicted. In essence, I become nothing less than a savage, and all this from a cute and mild-natured boy whose focus is solely on academics, or so it seems.

Everyone enjoys winning and there is no substitute for victory. Upon joining the water polo team, I immediately knew that it was going to take hard work and dedication, but what I didn’t know was the amount of joy that a team victory offers. The other lessons that sports teach—time management, leadership, and fair play—are all important as well, yet the thrill of a group victory is almost unequaled. My fondest memory is when, as a team, we beat a group of guys with twice as much talent and four times as much skill because we knew how to play together, and they did not.

Fourteen hour school days, practices that begin at six in the morning, and what seem like endless workouts have all come to this: one game, the quarterfinals of California Interscholastic Federation(CIF), in which a loss would send us home for good. The sun shines brightly as both teams line up on the side of the pool deck for the announcing of the players. Making it this far in CIF competition has already made us a Cinderella story, and it seems as though destiny will steer us down the same path today. Our team has no one taller than 5'11" or weighing more than one hundred fifty-five pounds compared to the opposing team, Murrieta, which has no one shorter than 6'2" or lighter than one hundred eighty pounds. Standing tall, they laugh at us with muscles bulging from their tan exteriors. The scene must look much like the biblical story of David and Goliath—especially with my 5'6, one-hundred-twenty-pound frame standing next to
Murrieta’s 6’6 two-hundred-twenty-pound goalie. Yet, we are not scared or intimidated. On the contrary, like David, we stand confident and proud. We assign our three best defenders to their best players and quickly notice a weakness in their goalie. Constantly, we remind each other that without teamwork we are nothing: "We work as one for twenty eight minutes," I say quietly during our pre-game meeting, "and Upland will have one more team to add in the win column. Let’s go and make them cry, boys!"

The whistle blows as our sprinter elevates his body out into the air, dolphin-like, in a mad race towards the ball sitting at the halfway mark. Almost as suddenly, the first quarter is over. Our opponents return to their coach with a plea of help in their eyes. "Coach, they're beating us three to one," one of their bigger players whines. We, on the other hand, sit quietly in our corner communicating to each other without saying a word, planning our next moves just by looking into each other’s eyes. Continuing to play with fire in our eyes and without fear in our hearts, we not only keep our lead but also build upon it and defeat a team that was predicted by many to be champions at the season’s end.

The entire team then jumps into the pool and begins to dunk and hug those of us who played nearly the entire game. Some begin to laugh as they congratulate each other. Others, myself included, initiate a series of barks, each person answering a teammate’s howl of victory. Hurrying out of the pool, we begin to shake the hands of the other team who had already begun to cry. The squad's seniors, four of the largest men I have ever seen, are literally breaking down right in front of us. Their sobs are uncontrollable whimpers, sometimes softer sometimes louder, and they make us realize the devastation we have just caused with our upset victory. The team of gargantuan men, diminished into a cluster of weeping losers, is truly a pitiful sight. And I love every moment of it.

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I sincerely hope that this helps you as you prepare for the college application process. Always remember to try your best and to be yourself. No matter where you end up in the coming years, you will be just fine if you stick to these tenants. Good luck!