

Here's exactly what it takes to get accepted into Harvard Business School, according to 5 grads and the managing director of admissions

Robin Madell 14m





Harvard Business School. Pgium/Getty

- **Roughly 10,000 prospective students apply to Harvard Business School each year, but the acceptance rate is only 11 percent.**

- **Below, five successful applicants discuss what worked and what didn't for getting in the door.**

- **For instance, in your entrance essay, it's important not to overlay tales of overcoming incredible adversity, which can be detrimental. The writing should also be succinct and uncomplicated.**

- **Spend time working in the field you want to pursue — and don't be afraid to network.**

- **The managing director of MBA admissions and financial aid pinpoints three common qualities shared by successful applicants, including the ability to enjoy and partake in lively discussion in a classroom setting.**

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The latest stats on Harvard's website show only an 11 percent acceptance rate for its prestigious MBA program. Those are [intimidating odds](#) for the roughly 10,000 prospective students who apply to Harvard Business School (HBS) each year.

If you're hoping to get a foot in the door, the best advice is often insider advice — something we specialize in at Business Insider. Read on to learn tips from the trenches about what worked and what didn't for HBS applicants who broke through the noise and got admitted.

Make your essay a 'window into your soul'

A critical component of any business school application is the

A critical component of any business school application is the personal essay — so when you're pitching to get into a school as coveted as Harvard, you need your written statement not just to shine, but to sparkle and dazzle. "At the risk of sounding overly dramatic, the essays are the windows into your soul," said Patrick Mullane, the executive director of [Harvard Business School Online](#) and a HBS graduate. "They are a chance to put a personality around the numbers that will make up much of an application. It's not enough to be a great writer — although that's essential. An applicant must also be able to communicate, in a relatively short amount of space, something that makes them human."

Mullane doesn't believe that this "something" needs to be a tale of overcoming incredible adversity, noting that overplaying such hands can be detrimental — and he feels that the writing need not be complicated. "Good communicators use simple language and short sentences to get their point across," said Mullane. "Comedian George Burns once said, 'The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.' I think that's great advice for admissions essays as well."

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Have a novel story to tell — and tell it well

Knowing that thousands of other top-caliber candidates may be following the above advice too, the question then becomes how to give *your* essay the best chance to rise to the top of the heap. HBS graduate Mike Rivkin, author and owner of [Silverfish Press](#), explains how having a different story to tell than the average college student may help tip the balance when it comes to winning over the admissions committee. Though Rivkin's college grades and scores were "good but not exemplary" and his extracurricular activities were modest, he focused his essays around his unique experience of running charter and commercial fishing boats out of San Diego. As a

Coast Guard licensed captain who earned his money for college by fishing for billfish and tuna, he recognized that he had a story to share that few other applicants could mirror.

"Looking back, I think the novelty of such a background resonated with HBS's search for diversity," said Rifkin. "The details of running an expensive fishing boat and being responsible for all related charters, fuel, crew, maintenance, and more were not part of your typical application." He added that some favorable letters of recommendation may have helped, too.

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Channel authenticity

In the quest to come up with a standout story, it's important to ensure that your essay is still true to who you are. Shaifali Aggarwal, an HBS graduate and the founder and CEO of [Ivy Groupe](#), a boutique MBA admissions consulting company, names communicating authentically as a key factor that helped her get selected for the program. "I took the time to think about my experiences across the personal/extracurricular, professional, and academic realms to gain an understanding of what my unique strengths and attributes were, and then highlighted those qualities through specific examples throughout my application," said Aggarwal.

Additionally, Aggarwal connected the dots in her story so that the admissions committee could understand the choices she made in the past and how they linked to her future aspirations. "To further differentiate myself, I provided color on why some experiences were instrumental in shaping who I was and were meaningful to me," she said. "In doing so, I demonstrated the human aspects of myself as well as self-awareness."

**Give yourself
enough time to**

Shaifali Aggarwal. Courtesy of Shaifali Aggarwal

write your masterpiece

Once you've identified the authentic tale that only you can tell and are committed to delivering it "George Burns' style," be sure not to sabotage your efforts by failing to carve out enough time to actually craft it.

Kaneisha Grayson was admitted to HBS with a 620 GMAT, and now helps others do the same as founder and CEO of [The Art of Applying](#). Grayson emphasizes the importance of giving yourself enough time, space, and support to write an outstanding essay, opining that many applicants dedicate too much time and energy on trying to get "GMAT final," while leaving themselves with just a few weeks — or even days — to work on the essay.

"The essay is the part of your application process over which you have the most control," said Grayson. "By making your essay a concise, compelling, and authentic representation of your personal and professional accomplishments, goals, and interest in joining the HBS community, you give yourself a huge advantage over people who treat the essay as an afterthought."

Camilo Maldonado, a member of HBS Class of 2017 and co-founder of [The Finance Twins](#), also focused on highlighting his unique work experience in his HBS application. At the time he applied, Maldonado worked at Bonobos, a men's apparel eCommerce company, where he was promoted to serve as the chief of staff at age 25. As a result, Maldonado was able to have a high amount of responsibility working for a smaller, less structured company. "I made sure that my recommendations highlighted the experiences I had working at a high-growth company," said Maldonado. "I knew that many of the applicants at the top business schools come from Wall Street, Fortune 500 companies, or tech giants, and that my less typical work experience would help me stand out."

Get your feet wet in industry

Camilo Maldonado. Courtesy of Camilo Maldonado

What else can you do to up your chances of getting into HBS in addition to writing a phenomenal essay? Some HBS grads

mentioned working and/or interning in their field — whether in traditional MBA territory such as finance and management

consulting, or other areas such startups, healthcare, government, or nonprofits — before applying to Harvard's graduate business program. Paige Arnof-Fenn, founder and CEO of [Mavens & Moguls](#), ticked all the boxes by being a Stanford undergrad and self-described "good student, strong in math, did well on my GMAT — it did not hurt that my father went there too." She added to these credentials by working for two years on Wall Street as a precursor to her business school application. "I had great recommendations from bosses, wrote good essays, and applied in the first round so felt I had a good shot to get in," explained Arnof-Fenn — and she did.

HBS graduate Marques Torbert, CEO of [Ametros](#), also pointed to the value of working in industry before throwing his hat in the ring at Harvard Business School. "Coming from a family background that didn't include business, finance, or higher education, I leveraged the resources and connections around myself that I already made," explained Torbert. With the help of a fellow mentor and an alumnus of his high school, he started his career by interning and working for equity firms, where he gained a wealth of financial knowledge. "With my drive to challenge myself, I wanted to expand my financial experience and understand the operations side of business," said Torbert.

Target these 3 characteristics

Paige Arnof-Fenn. Courtesy of Paige Arnof-Fenn

When the managing director of MBA Admissions and Financial Aid, Chad Losee, chimes in with admissions guidance, candidates for the program would be wise to listen. Losee notes that there are [three common characteristics](#) shared by successful applicants: "First, they have demonstrated leadership, whether it be in an academic, professional, or extracurricular setting, and show the potential to have even more impact," he said.

"We're also looking for applicants who have analytical aptitude and appetite, are able and willing to analyze a situation and form an opinion based on that analysis, and enjoy a lively discussion in a classroom setting, a key component of our case method of learning."

Finally, Losee emphasized that the school seeks students who will be an engaged part of the HBS community and be respectful of their classmates. "The best discussions come when there is diversity of thought, so it's very important to us that our student population reflects the global nature of business today," said Losee.

Rock your application — and then get lucky

Christine Telyan. Courtesy of Christine Telyan

Christine Telyan, an HBS graduate and the CEO and co-founder of London-based tech company [UENI](#), neatly sums up the views of many of her fellow alumni by stating that while there are several necessary conditions for admission to HBS — strong undergraduate grades, near perfect GMATs, and interesting or competitive work experience — none of these on their own are sufficient. "You need to have that fire of ambition in your gut that propels you to do things a bit out of reach," said Telyan. "You have to want to work on things that test the boundaries of business or society."

Telyan also points out the elephant in the room: in addition to doing everything right, you also have to be extremely lucky. "Countless capable, accomplished, ambitious applicants do not make the cut," she said. "Your profile needs to add just the right balance to the class of 900 students, which depends as much on the other 899 as it does on you. As with most successes in life, luck weighs heavily on why anyone is admitted to Harvard Business School, which should keep us all very grounded and humble."

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