

WHAT MATTERS? AND WHAT MORE?

50 Successful Essays for the Stanford GSB and HBS
(and Why They Worked)

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POETS &
QUANTS

Paul: *Shhhh! Can You Hear Me Listening?*

Many applicants have preconceived notions about how a great HBS essay should read. A candidate could be forgiven for thinking something along the lines of “HBS wants to see ferocious, unyielding leaders who achieve the impossible,” but the idea that most applicants would fit this mold is unrealistic. Reading this guide should prove that point! In this essay, which is one of our absolute favorites, the applicant writes about a superpower that effectively plays directly against the aforementioned perceived HBS “type.” Rather than being the kind of leader who raises his fist and screams, “After me!,” he *listens* and is continuously improving his ability to listen, while developing an enormous well of empathy in his dealings with others. In managing a complicated family dynamic, he realizes the importance of truly paying attention to what someone is saying, and he adroitly hones this skill through challenging community work, which itself equips him to solve personal and professional problems. Throughout, the applicant creates a narrative that is deeply thoughtful and calming. His voice in the essay gives the reader the sense that he is a fundamentally introspective person who draws power from reflection. But do not try to simply replicate his voice in your essay. What is critical is finding your own.



By **Jeremy Shinewald**

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As we review your application, what more would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy for the Harvard Business School MBA program? (Word count: 1,213)

Despite all we had been through in recent years, I wasn't quite sure what to expect when I asked my mother one summer evening in Singapore, "What role did I play during those tough times?"

In 2014, a pulmonologist in Singapore, where my parents live, told my father he had three months to live. The only solution was to undergo a complete double lung transplant in America—a precarious, logistically complex, and financially burdensome procedure. Despite the daunting news, I sprang into action and spent weeks researching options. I channeled my inner Product Manager and delegated aspects of the research and planning to different family members, creating dozens of spreadsheets detailing our to-dos. We then waited patiently for the call.

After months of nervous anticipation, I received word from the hospital that a matching donor lung had been found. We hastily grabbed our "go bags" and rushed to the hospital. The 10-hour surgery, though harrowing, was a stunning success. Assuming my work was done, I flew home to San Francisco with an enormous burden lifted. In the subsequent months, though, my mother would call me almost every day crying. Sometimes she was upset that my father—struggling with his recuperation—wasn't appreciative or, worse, was harsh with her; other times she was stressed by the body- and mind-numbing labor that goes into postsurgical care. I listened and would tell her that everything was going to be alright, but no amount of reassurance seemed to make her feel better. To be honest, I had to wonder if it actually would be; there was no clear end in sight, and everyone's patience was running thin. **1**

There's a saying in Chinese: "Amongst the hundreds of virtues, filial piety is the first in line (百行孝為先)." I had been there for my father and did not want exhaustion to prevent me from supporting my mother, who had given up her career and dedicated her life to raising and supporting her children. One evening, I stumbled upon an opportunity to volunteer at Helping Hands, a suicide prevention hotline that focuses on providing emotional support. I knew that helping strangers would be rewarding in itself but also thought the program could expand my own perspective and help me guide my family through this emotional crisis, so I signed up on the spot.

I had never encountered any experience as intense, rigorous, and grueling as Helping Hands. Helping Hands volunteers go through an active listening boot camp, with dropout rates higher than the Navy SEALs. After all, there is no room for error when you're taking calls on a suicide hotline. After months of relinquishing all weekend hours to training, I took my first call: a teenage girl who just wanted to "be a kid and go to school" but had to work to financially support her chronically ill parent. My first instinct was to respond with phrases like, "it's ok, don't worry," but training taught me that platitudes prevent the caller from feeling heard. Instead, an active listener must validate the callers' feelings and ask open-ended questions, empathetically steering the conversation "towards the pain." Rather than avoiding sensitive topics, active listeners get to the root of suffering through deliberate dialogue.

1 In just a few short paragraphs, we have learned of a life-changing medical miracle, and one would expect the applicant's story to be fundamentally uplifting, but he then reveals the challenges that arose afterward, which serves as an opening to a discussion of his subsequent growth. After all, this story should not be entirely about his father's surgery but about how the experience shaped his perspective.

2 The applicant uses simple language to clearly explain the nature of effective listening and its inherent power. He also shows remarkable dedication—500 calls is no small feat!

3 The applicant could have chosen not to discuss how his empathy extended to such a controversial, even socially unacceptable, individual, but this example illustrates the true depth and effectiveness of his skills. In explaining that he spoke with the caller as though he were a friend—in hopes of minimizing the likelihood that the individual would reoffend—the candidate is not lauding his abilities as a panacea but illustrating how he uses his listening skills and empathy to optimize outcomes.

4 In simple, plain language, the applicant shows that he is capable of looking inward, critically analyzing himself, and then responding with targeted personal growth initiatives. Improving one's core characteristics can often be challenging—the candidate credibly conveys that he is capable of true personal growth.

5 The applicant details how he applied his listening skills to defuse and then simplify a professional problem. Some readers might consider his ultimate solution, a time-bound test, almost plainly obvious, but the key here is not so much that the applicant found a way to resolve the issue but that he was able to do so in large part because of his thoughtfulness. His ability to listen well engenders trust in others.

Taking over 500 calls at Helping Hands, I learned how judgment and excellent listening skills are incompatible, especially when the other person holds views or values that are completely diametric to yours. **2** For example, I will never forget the call from a serial pedophile who had nobody to turn to except for us. Helping Hands requires operators to treat every caller equally and with empathy, no matter how you feel about them. So, I cast aside all presumptions and focused on talking to the caller like an old friend, listening to what he had to say and unraveling the struggles he was wrestling with. By helping him get troublesome thoughts off his chest, I could only hope that I helped reduce the chances of him reoffending. Practicing empathic listening with these callers enabled me to understand and connect with humans who are vastly different from me. **3**

Working with Helping Hands also taught me the importance of knowing my own emotional limits, so I learned to practice self-care as a means to engage others. I started journaling regularly and became far more open to being vulnerable. Having inherited a stoicism from my father, I had to take an honest, critical look at myself in order to manifest this shift. When I allowed myself to truly unmask my feelings, I started to find real strength and resilience within. **4**

As I came to these realizations, I began to incorporate them into phone calls with my mother. I withheld advice and simply listened actively, validating her feelings and allowing her to unpack her emotions. Slowly but surely, brick by brick, she began to piece her own life together in her own way. She allowed herself to leave my father's side and instead to focus on her own well-being. She picked up yoga and made new friends at her local church. A year later, she even took a solo trip to the UK to attend a retreat at a monastery.

Since my time volunteering at Helping Hands and supporting my mother, I've also incorporated active listening into my professional life. When I discovered that a teammate was struggling to keep up with her programming tasks, instead of jumping to conclusions, I put my active listening skills to use. She confided in me that she felt her manager had neglected her and that she had been struggling with personal issues outside of work. After talking through her concerns, we made an action plan that would allow her to get back on track. I followed up with her consistently and supportively, and a year later, she was nominated to become a technical lead.

In another instance, two executives with disparate opinions on our fraud management strategy kept talking past each other. One believed that Square should fight fraud using internal resources, while the other wished to leverage multiple external vendors. When the conversation reached an impasse, I used my active listening skills to paraphrase each person's position so both executives felt heard and followed up with open-ended questions to ensure the issues at hand were sufficiently explored. I steered the conversation out of stalemate, and the executive team reached a multilateral solution—to conduct a time-bound test of the potential systems before choosing a path. The following day, the CTO commended me on my approach and my diplomacy. Active listening allows me to work and understand people at a level that is simply unattainable if all I do is listen passively or speak without thinking. **5**

So, with this new perspective on personal growth, I found myself one quiet evening chatting with my mother, looking back at how far we had come from those trying times. She briefly pondered my role amid our family crisis. Against the sounds of cicadas in the humid Singapore air, she looked at me and replied, “you were my lifeline through my darkest times, listening to me day after day without fail.” In the end, the best way to support my mother had been to provide her with the scaffolding from which to reconstruct her own life.

SAMPLE

Andrey: Getting Outsiders In

Andrey faces the unenviable task of needing to somewhat distract the admissions reader from his past, but not for the red flags you might imagine. On the contrary, his pre-business school credentials, including an analyst role at a prominent investment bank and a subsequent associate role at a fast-growing private equity firm, are very compelling. In fact, both HBS and the Stanford GSB allocate an impressive number of their seats to applicants from this very pool. Yet therein lies the problem: the path of “banker-to-investor-to-MBA” is incredibly crowded, which complicates such candidates’ efforts to stand out. Everyone in this group has worked on a “big deal,” pulled an all-nighter, and stepped up to pinch-hit in the role senior to them. HBS has heard these stories many times before! So, if you are part of this pool, what do you do?

The answer is to share things the school will *not* readily know about you rather than those it will! Andrey focuses his essay on the importance of community and how he strives to contribute to his. Although he mentions his work, it serves merely as a backdrop, and he discusses neither deals nor transactions and instead reflects on mentoring more junior analysts and building a new tool to benefit his entire group. Andrey thereby avoids characterizing himself as “just another finance applicant” and showcases traits that HBS might not be able to assume in reviewing his resume—compassion, humility, initiative, and empathy.

Andrey’s essay also exemplifies the old adage that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. None of Andrey’s stories on their own would likely be sufficient in convincing HBS that he is the stuff the school’s future alumni are made of. Yet by mentioning several examples (some bold and character building, others—such as his effort to drum up interest in his office’s March Madness tournament—smaller in nature), each of which deals with a slightly different challenge or learning, Andrey conveys his earnestness and proves to HBS that his dedication to strengthening communities will enable him to be the very sort of leader the school desires.



By Liza Weale

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As we review your application, what more would you like us to know as we consider your candidacy for the Harvard Business School MBA program? (Word count: 885)

I emigrated from Eastern Europe at the age of eleven without speaking a word of English. Enrolling in the 7th grade at a local public school, I was lost. No one helped—especially not the two other Eastern Europeans who seemed to enjoy watching me struggle. The more I was excluded, the stronger my commitment to learning English and dropping my accent became. I did whatever it took—watching the Olsen twins’ movies with my mother on weekends and reading ESL books during recess. As my English skills improved, so did my friendships. I initiated conversations—risking ridicule for my accent—and asked to join my classmates’ activities. Soon, I no longer had to ask to be included. In the 8th grade, my classmates gave their final proof of acceptance by electing me as class president. **1** Instead of staying on the outside looking in, I invested in friends, the culture, and the language. I had finally made America feel like home.

The next time I had to make a new place feel like home was in college. Though I had the language down this time, I again knew no one, so I immersed myself in student life. The organization I was drawn most to was Student Government which emphasized building an inclusive community above all else. I loved contributing to the sense of connectedness through planning and executing events such as the school-wide semi-formal, the annual gingerbread house competition, and our first carnival, a timely break right before exams. When elected as Community Lead, I shifted my focus to advocating on classmates’ behalf. I saw firsthand how my classmates were finding connections through our campus clubs. However, upon taking a closer look, I realized that many of my classmates felt that clubs could be improved. I investigated their issues; the themes I heard were inconsistent: “Not enough of a budget to get our word out there! Not enough help from the administration!” I launched an effort to help, putting together a proposal for the Senate Finance Team that showed the need for increased funding. I slowly built buy-in with the faculty chairs of the committee and ultimately defended our ask in front of the Dean of Student Life. As a result of my dedication, clubs were awarded increased budgets, and a new full-time staff member was added to liaise with the clubs. Not only was UPenn now home to me, but I had also changed that home for the better for current and future students. **2**

Starting out as a stranger in my own communities, I’ve discovered that I take joy in helping others get on the “inside” faster. **3** Throughout college, in addition to my roles in student government, I pursued positions as a Teacher’s Assistant (TA) for three professors and as a Welcome Member giving tours of the campus to prospective students. As a mentor to underclassmen, there were the easy tasks like editing a resume and explaining how to utilize Excel. But I’ve learned that helping others requires real dedication. After Alexander, a student with a learning disability, failed his accounting course, a professor asked me if I would help him with the class as he retook it. He needed much more of me than students I’d TA’ed—I created new materials better suited for his needs and started fresh, reviewing each individual concept with him. When he passed the class, I may have been happier than he was. Now, I’m helping Alexander navigate his first year in the professional world.

1 Being elected class president one year after arriving at a school in a foreign land must have felt like a tremendous stamp of approval. Note, however, that Andrey does not focus too much on this success. Perhaps he recognized that in the eyes of the admissions committee, the achievement occurred too long ago to dwell on; perhaps he is humble and does not consider it as significant an accomplishment as the reader might. Whatever the reason, his choice ultimately strengthens the power of the example.

2 Theme-wise, Andrey’s college story here is similar to his eighth grade story (starting on the outside, becoming a leader within), but he takes this one a step further by explaining how he made a lasting impact on the budget process. If you use the thematic approach in your essay, make sure that each story reveals something new or more about you.

3 Note that only here at the start of paragraph three does Andrey state his thesis, but given what he has shared of his journey thus far, we already understand why community is so important to him.

Today, I still invest deeply in building a sense of community and connections. My side sessions with fellow analysts on complicated modeling and new accounting topics led to me being selected as one of two first-years at BankCo to tutor the summer analysts. Two years later and they're contacting me for guidance as they embark on the buy-side recruiting process—guidance I'm happy to provide. At Private Equity Partners (PEP), I introduced new energy into the March Madness and World Cup pools, replacing the generic email updates with my own 5-minute stand-up routine every Monday—drawing together partners and associates alike. As a UPenn alum, I've created panels and networking events to help current international students understand the visa process, a maze that I worked through myself years prior.

I also continue to make my mark on my “homes”: prior to leaving BankCo, I saw an opportunity to improve communication between industry groups and the M&A defense team by creating a website for defense team requests. On top of my regular responsibilities, I made the case for the investment and managed two technology developers in creating a website that is now used across the entire investment bank. At PEP, I championed the Tech Team Offsite, an opportunity to brainstorm sourcing strategies and new sub-sectors for investment. In addition to the new investment theses we articulated, the offsite served as a mechanism to further develop the relationships between junior members and senior advisors of the team.

My experiences have shaped the type of leader I am today—one who believes strongly in the value of culture and connections and one who seeks change that will help a broader group. I know what it's like to be on the “outs”—I strive to make an impact on others by helping them be on the “in.”