From my reading of the legal documents, it seems like the first 4 factors are really the most heavily considered (since they're mentioned most often), with the recommendation letter and alumni ratings used as supplementary factors.

1. Academic
2. Extracurricular
3. Athletic
4. Personal
5. Recommendation letters (2 teachers, counselor)
6. Alumni (interview) personal
7. Overall rating – average score of the 6 categories

The personal rating reflects attributes such as humor, sensitivity, grit, leadership, integrity, courage, kindness, and how “attractive” they are as a person to be with and respected. This category is more subjective than academic or extracurricular ratings.

The rating scale for personal qualities is roughly:

* 1: Truly outstanding qualities of character, extraordinary concern for others, singular leadership ability, courage in face of adversity, and strong recommender support
* 2: Very strong personal qualities
* 3 to 5: Varying degrees of respectable to weaker personal traits
* 6: Unread or severely lacking personal qualities

**How Do You Earn a \*1\* in Each Rating?**

Now the critical question - **what do you have to do to earn a 1 in the Academic, Extracurricular, Athletic, and Personal ratings?**

Luckily, as [we learned from](https://cases.justia.com/federal/district-courts/massachusetts/madce/1:2014cv14176/165519/420/0.pdf?ts=1529313878) [filings for the lawsuit](https://apps.washingtonpost.com/g/documents/local/evidence-in-harvard-admissions-trial/3248/), **Harvard readers are given a rubric to grade applicants on**.

Remember that the Overall Rating is a holistic combination of the ratings, not a strict average. I would believe that if you earn a 1 in Academic and Personal ratings, you're likely to get a 2 or above in Overall rating. You only need to be world-class in one way, with a [Spike](https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-get-into-harvard-and-the-ivy-league-by-a-harvard-alum#part2).

**Academic Rating:**

1. Summa potential. Genuine scholar; near-perfect scores and grades (in most cases) combined with unusual creativity and possible evidence of original scholarship.

2. Magna potential: Excellent student with superb grades and mid-to high-700 scores (33+ ACT).

3. Cum laude potential: Very good student with excellent grades and mid-600 to low-700 scores (29 to 32 ACT).

4. Adequate preparation. Respectable grades and low-to mid-600 scores (26 to 29) ACT).

5. Marginal potential. Modest grades and 500 scores (25 and below ACT).

6. Achievement or motivation marginal or worse.

 This confirms what we already know - **getting perfect grades and test scores is not impressive enough to be world-class in academics.**

As the Harvard Interviewer Handbook says elsewhere, "**more than** presenting the Committee with superior testing and strong academic records...the applicant admitted primarily for unusual intelligence also presents **compelling evidence of creativity and originality**." (emphasis mine)

Legal documents reveal some useful details: out of 42,749 applicants for Class of 2022,

* 8,000 had perfect GPAs
* 625 had a perfect score on ACT; 361 had a perfect 2400 on SAT
* 3,500 had perfect SAT math; 2,700 had perfect SAT verbal.

There are just too many students who perform at the top 1% of academics. With 4 million high school students per year, 1% is 40,000 students!

Within academic-type applicants, **Harvard is looking for the leading future scholars**. To get a 1 in this rating requires demonstration of this in high school, likely through original research that is vetted favorably by a Harvard faculty member.

As [Harvard Dean of Admissions William Fitzsimmons said](https://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/09/14/harvarddean-part3/),

*"Several hundred of our admitted students each year have the kind of stunning academic credentials—well beyond test scores and grades—that our faculty believe place them among the best potential scholars of their generation. ..."*

For this, it's not enough just to do research - thousands of students do this every year. It might not be sufficient either to be a minor co-author on a paper.

Ideally, you need to show original contributions and ideas, corroborated by your research supervisor (e.g. in a supplementary recommendation). You might also be nationally-ranked in a research competition like [Intel ISEF](https://student.societyforscience.org/intel-isef?mode=topic&context=3) or [Regeneron STS](https://student.societyforscience.org/regeneron-sts).

**Extracurricular Rating:**

1. Unusual strength in one or more areas. Possible national-level achievement or professional experience. A potential major contributor at Harvard. Truly unusual achievement.

2. Strong secondary school contribution in one or more areas such as class president, newspaper editor, etc. Local or regional recognition; major accomplishment(s).  
[in another filing]: "Significant school, and possibly regional accomplishments: for example, an applicant who was the student body president or captain of the debate team and the leader of multiple additional clubs."

3. Solid participation but without special distinction. (Upgrade 3+ to 2- in some cases if the e/c is particularly extensive and substantive.)

4. Little or no participation.

5. Substantial activity outside of conventional EC participation such as family commitments or term-time work (could be included with other e/c to boost the rating or left as a "5" if it is more representative of the student's commitment).

6. Special circumstances limit or prevent participation (e.g. a physical condition).

2: "

5: "Family responsibilities at home or very limited resources that make it unlikely that the applicant could participate in extracurricular or other activities."

A 2 rating focuses on "**school and regional accomplishments**." To put it bluntly: big fish in a little pond.

Remember - **there are over 37,000 high schools in the country**. Not every school has the same extracurriculars, but just think - in the US every year, there are at least 20,000 student body presidents (and vice presidents, treasurers, etc.); 10,000 captains of the debate team; 50,000 captains of sports teams; 100,000 presidents of clubs.

There are a LOT of local achievers.

**To be world-class, you have to do something that is notable on the national or international scale.**

This doesn't necessarily mean that you literally need to build an international-level organization with branch offices in Paris. The point is that among all the applicants, your achievements stand out on the national stage - for instance, building a mobile app with hundreds of thousands of active users is likely pretty nationally distinctive.

**Athletic Rating:**

This is relatively more straightforward:

1. Unusually strong prospect for varsity sports at Harvard, desired by Harvard coaches.

2. Strong secondary school contribution in one or more areas; possible leadership role(s).

3. Active participation.

4. Little or no interest.

5. Substantial activity outside of conventional EC participation such as family commitments or term-time work (could be included with other e/c to boost the rating or left as a "5" if it is more representative of the student's commitment).

6. Physical condition prevents significant activity.

1 is for recruited varsity athletes.

Personally, I was probably a 4 - I got an A in PE and that's it. And that was OK - Harvard still wanted me! **Again, it's not about being well-rounded, it's about**[**having a spike**](https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-get-into-harvard-and-the-ivy-league-by-a-harvard-alum#part3)**that makes you world-class.**

**Personal Rating:**

Here it gets a bit tricky. Here are a few statements in the legal documents that I pulled out:

* The personal rating "summarizes the applicant's personal qualities based on all aspects of the application, including essays, letters of recommendation, the alumni interview report, personal and family hardship, and any other relevant information in the application."
* Characteristics include "applicant's humor, sensitivity, grit, leadership, integrity, helpfulness, courage, kindness," whether the person is an "attractive person to be with" and is "widely respected."

This is a more subjective category than the other 3 ratings. It's based on the student's background, how the student presents herself (in the essays and interview), and how others perceive the student (recommendations).

Note that just like having an Academic Spike, **it's possible to have a Personal Spike too**. A student might get a Personal rating of 1 (say, for having overcome tremendous difficulties and showing outstanding personal character), while getting non-1 scores for Academic, Extracurricular, and Athletic scores. And this might be sufficient to get the student admitted (though 1's in Personal are rarer than in the other categories).

Here's the rubric description, which is not super helpful except for the bottom ratings:

1: Outstanding

2: Very Strong

3: Generally Positive

4: Bland or somewhat negative or immature

5: Questionable personal qualities

6: Worrisome personal qualities

This is why the interview is important - no matter how much of a genius you are, Harvard doesn't want jerks in its community. And if you can't suppress being a jerk for an hour-long interview, you certainly won't behave well for 4 years of college.

**It's also bad to be "bland"** - interviewers want to see some sort of spark or *joie de* *vivre*, partlysince this is indicative of passion and thus future impact on the world.

Nearly all applicants who are admitted went through an interview - as the document says, "those who do not interview are rarely admitted."

(FYI: The personal rating is where the lawsuit alleges Asian-Americans are punished. Despite having higher academic and extracurricular scores than any other racial group, Asians received the lowest score of any racial group on personal rating from Harvard admissions staff.)

**Letter of Recommendation Rating:**

Legal filings show the following scoring for "School Support," with separate ratings for teachers 1, 2, and counselor.

1. Strikingly unusual support. "The best ever," "one of the best in x years," truly over the top.

2. Very strong support. "One of the best" or "the best this year."

3. Above average positive support.

4. Somewhat neutral or slightly negative.

5. Negative or worrisome report.

6. Neither the transcript nor prose is in the folder.

8. Placeholder.

9. Transcript only. No SSR prose.