

# Introduction

When people find out that I went from being a high school dropout to graduating with honors from Harvard University, they're often shocked and eager to know how I accomplished such a seemingly impossible feat. Their intrigue only deepens when I tell them that I had a 1.5 GPA at the time of dropping out, that I scored in the bottom 10% on standardized math tests, and that I earned a GED instead of a traditional high school diploma. And yet, by the time I applied to Harvard, I was 99% confident I would be accepted, because I had crafted a specific, extremely detailed multi-year plan.

But that's just part of the story.

I was born into poverty in Detroit, Michigan, and raised in Florida by a single mother who worked nonstop to support three children, me being the youngest. In elementary school, I thrived academically, but by middle school, my interest waned, and my grades plummeted. By high school, I was so far behind that I dropped out. What followed were some of the darkest years of my life. I got gold teeth and spent most of my time in the streets, falling in with the wrong crowd, and becoming a thug. I was arrested, jailed twice, and even experienced a bout of homelessness. When I wasn't hustling in the streets, I bounced between dozens of mundane part-time jobs, often quitting or getting fired within a week. At times I felt hopeless because I lacked any marketable skills, or so I thought.

Then, everything changed.

I found mentors, learned a new skill, and started to rethink my life. I got accepted into the University of Southern California (USC) where I graduated *magna cum laude*. From there, my life became a series of extraordinary achievements including working in Hollywood in the legendary William Morris Agency mailroom in its notoriously difficult-to-get-in training program. I then wrote and published an interview book and began to speak around the country before finally being accepted into Harvard for graduate school. While there, I earned straight A's and won Harvard's prestigious Leadership in Education award and scholarship. Post-graduation, I created a six-figure position out of thin air at Harvard working with a powerful Apple Vice-President, despite the program having no existing opening or budget, and after being told by Harvard that it was impossible for them to hire me. I became a successful Harvard research fellow and coauthored several critically acclaimed books with that same Apple VP. The same principles that got me into Harvard later turned one of those books into the bestselling education book in all of China.

I say all of this to hopefully inspire you. Because if I can do all of this despite the significant challenges I had to overcome, just imagine what *you* could do with the same strategic tools that I used. Which leads to the question I'm asked most often: *How did I go from where I was to where I am now?* The answer to that comes down to just two words: street smarts.

At some point I realized that the one thing I had that set me apart was an ability to navigate challenges and seize opportunities in ways others couldn't. Most of this I learned by literally being in the streets, gaining experience out of necessity, but eventually I made a conscious decision to master it.

Street smart tactics enabled me to accomplish things that once seemed completely unimaginable. Things no teacher, advisor, counselor, or self-help book would ever teach. While aspects of street smarts have been touched on in books before, there wasn't a truly comprehensive, *actionable*, how-to guide that combined the necessary mindset with specific strategies for applying it to real-world situations. So, I decided to write it myself. In these pages, I'll share specific, in-depth details on how I pulled off each miraculous goal and provide step-by-step instructions on each that you can use to make your own dreams come true.

## What is Street Smarts?

I define street smarts as the ability to navigate real-world challenges with practical knowledge, situational awareness, creative solutions, resourcefulness, and adaptability. It combines aspects of multiple popular concepts such as emotional intelligence, social intelligence, practical intelligence, and grit. All of these concepts involve navigating competition and challenges under realistic constraints, but each focuses on a different aspect of that process, and all are directly related to street smarts.

*Emotional intelligence* is your ability to understand and manage your own emotions while also reading and influencing the emotions of others. *Social intelligence* is about navigating social dynamics, reading body language, adapting to different contexts, and building strong relationships. *Practical intelligence* refers to solving real-world problems using experience, intuition, and resourcefulness rather than just formal education. And *grit* is the combination of passion and perseverance that keeps you pursuing long-term goals even when obstacles pile up.

All of these are well-supported by decades of science and psychological research. But none of them individually capture the ability to create opportunities where none exist, to find backdoors when the front door is locked, and to transform obstacles into advantages through strategic thinking and creative problem-solving. All of this together is what I consider to be *street smarts*, and learning to master it is what this book is about.

Street smarts are part of a broader category of "soft skills," which are often overlooked or perceived as less important than so-called "hard skills" (technical, measurable abilities like coding, accounting, or data analysis.) Wrong. Hard skills are far easier to learn, often requiring little more than memorization, while soft skills are complex and take time to master. Hard skills are also typically goal-specific and limited in scope, whereas soft skills are transferable to virtually any goal, whether it's related to school, career, or personal goals.

There's also a big difference between street smarts and book smarts. While book smarts may provide the theoretical knowledge and technical skills to succeed in structured environments, street smarts are what truly set people apart in the actual world. During my time at Harvard, nearly everyone I met there was exceptionally book smart, but only a few possessed street smarts, and it's no coincidence that those who did ended up accomplishing more both academically and professionally. Book smarts can help you

understand rules, but street smarts show you how to make them work in your favor and bend or break them when necessary.

## The Hidden Layer Beneath Merit

In theory, merit is the ultimate decider. Success *should* come to those with the best performance, the strongest skills, the most impressive accomplishments, and the hardest work ethic. But in reality there's much more to it, and street-smart people operate in the real world, not the ideal one. If merit were enough to succeed, then every highly skilled technician, accomplished teacher, and hard-working single mother with multiple jobs would be considered enormously successful. Unfortunately, they're not.

This merit myth is perpetuated by media stories and interviews with successful people who emphasize effort and credentials while conveniently leaving out many of the strategies and decisions that made those achievements possible.

The truth is that extraordinary success operates on a hidden layer beneath the surface. There is a set of unspoken rules and strategies that determine who actually gets ahead and who doesn't. These rules aren't taught anywhere, and most people never even know to look for them. More importantly, the people who use them do not want you to know about them. Keeping them secret serves two purposes: it gives them a competitive edge over everyone else, and it helps them maintain the illusion that they succeeded based on merit alone.

In fact, merit is not always measurable and is inherently subjective. Consider this: If one employee works 80-hour weeks but makes a lot of mistakes and another employee works the bare minimum but makes very few mistakes, which one deserves to be promoted? There is no right answer, it's entirely up to the decision-maker. So then how do they choose? They look for anything that makes candidates stand out. But it's difficult to stand out by doing the same thing everyone else is doing, in the same way they do it, even if you're doing them better. The best way to stand out is by putting yourself in a different league altogether. This is where people with street smarts truly excel.

Here's a pop quiz for you. If the admissions committee at Harvard had to choose between the following two students, who do you think they would pick?

**Student A:** Perfect 4.0 GPA, 1580 SAT, student body president, varsity captain, honor society member, volunteer at local hospital

**Student B:** 3.5 GPA, 1350 SAT, convinced distinguished professors to let them audit graduate-level courses, became a published author and speaker in their intended field, and built relationships with influential people throughout the industry

In terms of merit, who *deserves* acceptance? Many would argue it should be Student A because of the better grades and higher score, both clearly measurable factors. But the

reality is this: Student B would win acceptance every time and it's not even close. Why? Because Student A did what they were *supposed* to do. Those achievements are no different than what thousands of other applicants have also done. Student B, on the other hand, showed they can figure out how to do things that aren't even supposed to be possible. After all, what high school kid has a published book, gives public speeches, and maintains active relationships with prominent industry leaders? Very few, if any.

Student A blended in. Student B stood out.

Students who get into elite schools and workers who land elite jobs aren't necessarily the smartest or hardest working. They're often the most ambitious, resourceful, and best at making things happen no matter what. Student B used street smarts to gain advantage by standing out. Those unconventional accomplishments didn't happen by accident. We live in a world that rewards those who think differently, act strategically, and refuse to settle for conventional paths. Unlike Student A, Student B knew how to create opportunities that most students don't even know exist.

Throughout this book I'm going to show you step-by-step strategies that you can use to master these street-smart rules of success. Whether you're applying to your dream college, trying to land that perfect job, or pursuing something else entirely, what you will learn within these pages will give you the tools you need to pierce the hidden layer beneath merit, the real determinant of who wins and who doesn't.

## Who This Book is For

If you want to get ahead, you need street smarts, regardless of where you're starting from or what you're trying to achieve. Whether you're climbing the career ladder, applying to college, running a business, competing for donations, or simply navigating life's challenges, the strategies in this book will help you stand out and achieve your goals.

- **Job Seekers and Professionals:** Learn how to craft standout resumes, dominate interviews, network effectively, and position yourself for promotions.
- **Students and College Applicants:** Master backdoor strategies to connect with decision-makers, craft memorable applications and essays, and stand out in competitive admissions.
- **Entrepreneurs and Creatives:** Discover unconventional ways to pitch ideas, secure funding, land clients, and turn your vision into reality.
- **Leaders and Managers:** Train your team to think outside the box, overcome insurmountable obstacles, and accomplish what competitors think is impossible.
- **Parents and Educators:** Equip the next generation with the skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

No matter who you are or what stage you're at in your career, street smarts give you access to a game that your competitors don't even know they're playing.

## Why AI Can't Compete

Street-smart skills matter now more than ever. The rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) and automation is presenting new challenges, transforming industries and reshaping the job market. Many people are rightfully worried about AI replacing jobs, but street smarts can't be automated. The ability to think creatively, adapt to change, build and leverage relationships, and navigate social and emotional dynamics is uniquely human, and these skills are becoming even more valuable as AI handles the predictable work. The unpredictable, strategic, human work is where you'll use street smarts to dominate.

## What to Expect

This book is built around eight core rules that form a repeatable framework for achieving breakthrough results in any area of life, well beyond academia. Before you dive in, let me walk you through exactly how it's structured. This is a practical how-to guidebook. My personal stories lead off many of the rules and some of them are pretty dramatic. But my stories are actually secondary, there only to offer proof for the how-to lessons that follow. Every story exists to demonstrate specific street-smart lessons, and these are what matters. After each story you'll find clear, actionable strategies you can apply immediately to your own situation, whatever that situation happens to be. Here's what each rule will cover:

**Rule #1: Use Backdoors** – Finding and creating backdoors is the secret sauce of street smarts and every tactic and strategy in this book is built on them. You'll learn how to spot these unconventional paths that others overlook and how to create new ones when none seem to exist. You'll learn key takeaways from the strategy I used to get into USC while laying the groundwork for a strategic multi-year plan to attend Harvard. You'll learn the difference between front-door and backdoor thinking, how to change your mindset into one that can spot opportunities your competitors don't see, as well as the single word I use that instantly triggers backdoor thinking. You'll also read examples of how I handle difficult and complex situations compared to how almost everyone else does, learn how to get your foot in the door anywhere, and creative ways to bypass gatekeepers.

**Rule #2: Align Incentives** – Learn how to identify what truly motivates individual people and how to position your goals in ways that make others want to help you achieve them. I'll share exactly how I created a six-figure research position at Harvard immediately after graduating by securing third-party funding for my salary. I'll break down every move and show you how to use the same tactics. You'll also learn how to

navigate different types of incentives and how to turn every proposal you make into a win-win that is almost always successful. I'll explain the single, most important question to ask that will all but guarantee you get what you want, give examples of incentive alignment in outreach, evaluation, relationships, crisis, and business, and show you how some of the most meaningful outcomes in life come from using this rule in everyday situations.

**Rule #3: Trigger Reciprocity** – Discover how to create massive opportunities by giving value up front. I'll relay the story of how I turned a \$50 plaque into over \$10,000 in financial support and the secret to becoming a master fundraiser virtually overnight. I'll show you how reciprocity operates at the highest levels, from billionaires to Fortune 500 companies to major nonprofit organizations. You'll learn exactly what you can offer powerful and influential people, even when you think you have nothing they want. I'll also show you multiple strategies to ensure they not only accept your offer but truly appreciate it. Finally, I'll explain when the best time is to ask for things, whether you should, and go over the things you should *never* ask for, even though everyone else does.

**Rule #4: Borrow Credibility** – Learn how to build trust and influence the street-smart way by strategically aligning yourself with respected people, organizations, and ideas. I'll share how I wrote and published an interview book featuring the most respected people in my field, the project that ultimately launched my entire career. I'll give you step-by-step instructions on how to do the same thing regardless of your industry. I'll also teach about a powerful volunteering strategy. And I'll walk you through the outreach strategy I used to connect with nationally recognized figures, including the actual email I sent word-for-word. You'll see how icons like Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, and Elon Musk borrowed credibility early in their careers and how you can apply those same principles to your own.

**Rule #5: Build Relationships** – Everyone knows that a large part of success comes down to who you know. The real secret is how to meet influential people in the first place. I'll share how I built my network at every stage, including the story of how I secured my first big mentor through a very sneaky move. It's a tactic you can use as well. I'll teach you strategies for finding a powerful mentor and how to create your own personal *street-smart advisor* while waiting. You'll learn the magic question that transforms a single connection into an entire network. You'll also see the original document I created at Harvard on sending street-smart emails, a guide that ended up going viral across campus.

You can use it to secure meetings with anyone. Finally, I'll explain how I maneuvered my way into the William Morris Agency training program, a notoriously difficult feat with an acceptance rate lower than Harvard's, and how you can use the same approach in any field.

**Rule #6: Break Barriers** – Every barrier you will ever face is a no. And every no has a street-smart answer. In this rule I'll show you how to identify exactly what kind of no you're dealing with and which tool in this book breaks it. I'll share the story of how my mentor systematically dismantled my mental ceiling by giving me impossible tasks and debriefing every failure until I stopped believing in the word impossible altogether. I'll walk you through the internal and external barriers that stop others in their tracks and explain exactly how to get around them. I'll show you how I secured meetings with Google, Apple, and Meta in two weeks using a diagnostic framework anyone can learn. And I'll introduce you to the one barrier that operates on both levels at once and show you the science behind eliminating it completely, no matter where you're starting from.

**Rule #7: Break Rules** – In this rule I'm doing something that is strongly frowned upon by Harvard: sharing my full essay. This unconventional essay was so bold that it got passed around the admissions committee and now you get to read it word for word. Whether you're applying to college or not, read it anyway, because what's inside it goes far beyond admissions. I'll teach you the one factor required to become so memorable that schools and employers alike will be left speechless. You'll also learn a street-smart three-tier job search strategy that nobody ever uses, one that will leave every other candidate far behind. There's also a framework that tells you instantly which rules are truly off limits, which ones bend for the right person under the right circumstances, and which ones should actively be broken.

**Rule #8: Commit Fully** – In this final rule you'll see how 5 minutes was all it took to virtually guarantee my Harvard acceptance and why that matters to you. You'll learn about two types of commitment needed to succeed. One will change everything and most people have no idea the other one even exists. I'll introduce you to the Greyhound Test, a street-smart challenge so demanding that most people will fail, but those who pass become nearly impossible to stop. You'll discover the one thing you're doing daily that is quietly hurting your chances of success and how to instantly stop it. You'll also learn why your competitors won't use street smarts even after they know exactly how, and what that means for you. Finally, I'll make you a guarantee that no other success book would ever dare make.

These are the hidden rules of success they don't teach you in school, the ones that have helped those in the know rise above obstacles and reach their goals. In each rule, I share a personal story that showcases some aspects of street smarts and follow that up with specific tactical strategies and step-by-step action plans for you. Once you've finished the book, I'd encourage you to go back and reread those stories. You'll be surprised how many of the rules were quietly running in the background of each one, ones you couldn't have spotted the first time through. Throughout the book I also share the actual documents and materials behind my stories, because seeing exactly how something was done is worth more than any description of it. By the end of the book, you'll have both the mindset and the street-smart tools to turn obstacles into opportunities and ambition into achievement.

Let's get started.

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