

How to Find the Most Interesting Harvard Classes: Advice from a Graduating Senior Who Has Loved Every Single Class

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Step 1) Keep an open mind.

While this may seem like a strange first item, it's really the key to everything that follows. Often the classes that I have found the most rewarding have been ones that challenged or surprised me. I've also found that, quite frequently, classes that sounded interesting on paper didn't turn out to be that way for one reason or another.

In general, CUE ratings on "difficulty" or "workload" should be ignored. If you're truly interested in a topic, you'd be surprised how easy it is to crank out a paper or to do the reading. If you're not, then reading even 10 pages a week will seem like a chore. Plus, professors do actually look at the CUE, so if they decide the course is too easy, they'll add more work for the next year.

Step 2) Be honest with yourself.

If you've decided to take a class with your friends, make sure you're taking something that **you** like, and not just what **they** like. Choosing a class that your friends are taking is fine if knowing that your friend(s) presence in class will get you out of bed in the morning or actually to do the reading for your study groups, but it can also mean you might miss out on a unique experience.

Step 3) Browse the course catalog in random departments

Did you have an art history class in high school that you really loved? Were you a good writer? Check out the History of Art and Architecture or English department course offerings. You might find something interesting, and with the Gen Ed program, chances are you may knock out a requirement too.

Even if you don't, follow step 2 and explore some other interests. You might have had a difficult time settling on a concentration, and it would be nice to explore that other interest a little further. You might even end up deciding to switch to something entirely new or get a secondary. The earlier you figure this out, the more options you'll have to achieve what you want.

If you'd like to make your transcript look impressive consider this: like Harvard College, employers and grad schools (and yes, even med schools) want to see that you have talent and interests in areas besides your concentration and that you're a well-rounded human being.

Step 4) Talk to people and send emails

Send out emails over your House or student group list asking people what was the best class they ever took. Chances are you'll find out about things you never would have even thought to explore.

Case in point: Someone emailed out over my House list asking if there are any public speaking classes at Harvard. After a long thread, the result was that there were two: Expos 40 and Dramatic Arts 119: Vocal Production for the Stage. I have never done any acting whatsoever, but I showed up for the first day of DA 119 on a whim. The class was filled more than double the number of spots available, and it was an "audition-based" class. It was late in the day, towards the end of shopping week, and I had time to kill. I figured that it would also be the closest I ever got to an acting class. It was quirky--we crawled on the floor and did jumping jacks--and fun. I loved it and could literally feel myself being pushed outside the box. Two days later, I found out that I had gotten in. DA 119 completely changed my self-image, gave me a new voice and some great friends. Of all the classes I take with me from Harvard, this may be my favorite...all thanks to a House list email (and an open mind).

Step 5) Fill your shopping week schedule to the brim with a variety of classes.

Every year, I put all of my interesting classes on the course selection tool calendar and balk. It's a potpourri of color, and I'll realistically make it to about one-third of those classes. Still, I find that it's better to have too many classes from which to choose, than too few.

Some classes you know you have to take, but don't fill your shopping card just with concentration classes. Balance is the key to sanity. I have rarely taken more than two concentration classes per semester and been able to finish all of my requirements (including cores and all but one premed requirement) by senior fall.

Departmental science classes tend to be consistently offered year-to-year. Humanities and social sciences classes don't. Quite a few classes are offered on an "every-other-year" system, so if you miss out now, you might not get a chance to take them again. Furthermore, there are definitely good semesters and bad semesters when it comes to course offerings. It's a gamble and potential waste to find yourself taking 6 random classes senior year just to fill up electives.

Don't believe anyone who tells you that all departmental, non-Gen Ed classes are inaccessible because of pre-requirements. While a lot of departmental classes do have pre-reqs, many do not. Furthermore, if you really like a class, go talk to the professor and see why he/she listed those pre-reqs. Most professors will be happy to talk to you about the class. Plus, here's a little secret: no one (aside from maybe your concentration advisor) actually checks to see if you've done the pre-required courses. It's ultimately the professor's decision whether or not to allow you into the class, so go talk to him/her!

Step 6) Take a language class.

Yes, this applies to you even if you passed Harvard's language requirement. Harvard's language classes are fantastic, and you do yourself a disservice if you don't even **shop** them.

Who knows? You might even find yourself enjoying the language enough to try for a citation. If not, it's ok to take just a semester or a year. It's worth your time and might give you a fun summer opportunity. (I spent the summer after my year of Japanese in Tokyo. Although the program didn't require any knowledge of Japanese, it definitely helped!)

Learning another language gives you another way of looking at the world. In the 21st century, the more global outlook you have, the better. Having studied Spanish and French, I took a year of Japanese and African and African American Studies 20: African Language and Culture (satisfies foreign cultures core). Graduating, I know that I understand at least a little about the minds and attitudes of some of the major world regions.

Step 7) Prepare to be flexible during shopping week.

If you meet a friend walking out of a 10 am Monday class who loved it, and it sounds genuinely interesting, check it out on Wednesday.

If you walk into a class and find yourself checking email rather than listening to the professor, leave. Go check another class off your list. If the class material and/or the professor don't hold your attention for an hour, they probably won't all semester either. While you may feel guilty or rude leaving, just do so as quietly as possible: the professors (should) understand that students are shopping, not enrolled in, their classes.

If you don't have a class to shop during a particular hour, walk into a random room. Yes, I'm serious. I found my Moral Reasoning core this way—I was lost in Boylston and heard someone say there was a Moral Reasoning class meeting in the main auditorium: needing the core, I walked in—and ended up loving it.

Try out new or revamped classes. I made some of my best finds this way:

- Moral Reasoning 82: Trust, Vision and Doubt in Ethics, Politics, and Law
- CS 50: Introduction to Computer Science
- Japanese History 145: Lady Samurai in Medieval Japan

Step 8) Have fun.

Harvard College is one of the only institutions where you get to see what classes are like before you enroll in them. It's a huge gift that can save you from walking in on the first day to discover a dry lecturer and pile of dull reading. During shopping week, each one of us is literally a kid in an intellectual candy store. Go crazy. Shop random classes. Have fun. I hope you find a surprise or two.