

A Primer on How to Get the Most Out of My Courses

Some simple suggestions to maximize the learning experience and opportunity

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If you are reading this case note, you likely have decided to enroll in one of my courses* at the Yale School of Management. My courses are centered around being an entrepreneur and CEO in a growing, small or medium-sized business. This is a wonderful way to build a life and career, and I am truly excited to explore this body of work with you. I am genuinely flattered and delighted that you are sharing a small part of your time at Yale with me.

This brief note will provide you with a primer on how to make my courses a valuable and enriching experience. You and I have a common goal: we both want you to learn as much as possible from our time together. I take my role as an educator in this partnership seriously. I understand that you are making a substantial investment in tuition and incurring the opportunity cost of not earning a salary while at Yale. Most importantly, you are here to learn and discover how to construct a meaningful life. I want to ensure that our time together has a very high return on your significant investment. In this case note, I will detail what action steps you can take to maximize this return. By sharing how to boost your learning opportunity, I hope I am setting you up for success in my course and after graduation as a leader in business and society.

Perhaps the most important concept I can share with you in this note is that the educational value you receive will be a direct function of and perfectly correlated with the amount of effort you put into the course. Like most things in life, the more you put in, the more you will get out. This should be seen as a truly empowering perspective.

I am your partner in your educational odyssey, and I will make the journey as rich and fulfilling as you want it to be, but ultimately, you are the one who owns your scholastic experience. To use an analogy, consider an exercise program with a fitness coach. Your coach can be a motivational and catalytic partner; they can structure a plan for you and correct your form, but they cannot do the push-ups for you. No matter how much your fitness coach might want you to be healthy and in shape, it is only if you want it and are willing to do the push-ups that you will achieve fitness – that is, you own your success. It is the same with learning in my courses. You will only grow and achieve concrete internalization of the concepts we discuss to the degree that you put forth the effort to do so. The painful truth is that there is no substitute for the hard work it takes to absorb this knowledge and make it work for you – and my courses involve hard work; there is a lot of reading, analysis, thinking, and synthesizing. But with time and effort, there are meaningful rewards and actionable results. After my course, you will have improved

* See these illustrative syllabi: [Patterns in Entrepreneurship MGT 874](#), [Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition MGT 671](#), [Rollups, Consolidations and Programmatic Acquisitions MGT 677](#) and [Leading Small and Medium Enterprises MGT 674](#).

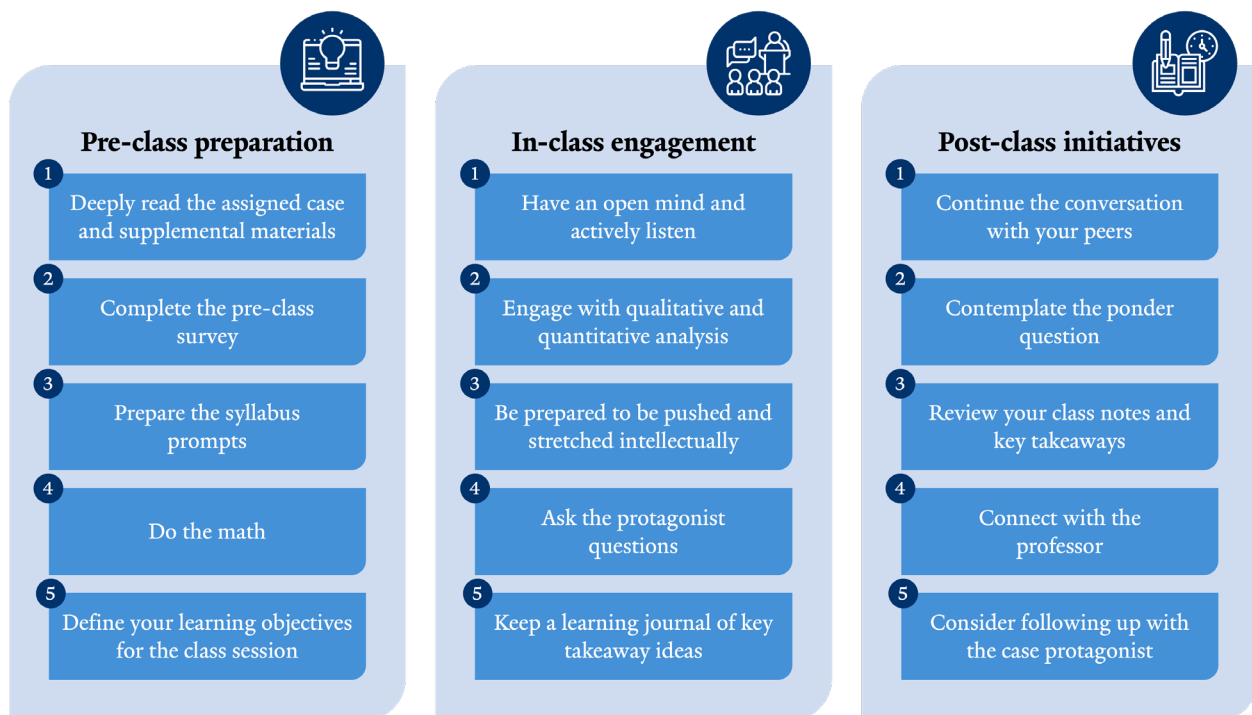
entrepreneurial and financial skills. You will have a deeper understanding of how to run and grow a business, and maybe even how you want to build and construct your life.

This case note will specifically explore the following:

- What to expect from the classroom experience
- The three ways you can enhance ownership of your educational opportunity
 - ✓ Pre-class preparation
 - ✓ In-class engagement
 - ✓ Post-class initiatives

In **Figure 1**, you can see the three ways to enhance ownership of your educational opportunity with the corresponding action steps. I will explore these concepts further throughout this note.

Figure 1: Three ways to enhance ownership of your educational opportunity



The classroom experience

Part of teaching is the transmission of knowledge, but the true goal of a Yale education is to help students develop their individual perspectives, critical reasoning, and analytical skills. I set up the classroom as a comfortable and safe laboratory to facilitate this development – the perfect setting for exploration and experimentation. My classroom is an ideal context for learning, growing, testing ideas, acquiring new tools for your toolbox, and sharpening old tools that might have gotten rusty. I will never berate or embarrass a student for being wrong. It is okay to be wrong and learn. My classroom has a very high safety net. I am here to facilitate your growth and development in becoming an entrepreneur and leader. So, when in the classroom, expect lively and vigorous debate, and expect to be challenged and pushed by me and your peers – that is the only way to grow and truly learn – and also expect to do this in a respectful and supportive environment.

My teaching approach is based on the case method. In each class session, we will explore a business opportunity or challenge through the eyes of a case protagonist. We read the case and perform quantitative and qualitative analysis, drawing upon the Yale SOM core curriculum and students' personal experiences and weaving in assigned supplemental readings. The goal is for you to step into the protagonist's shoes and put on your CEO hat. What would you do in the situation? How would you address the challenges and opportunities at hand? What qualitative and quantitative tools would you reach for and why? Short of being a CEO in an actual business, there is no better way to learn to be a CEO than by stepping into the shoes of a CEO protagonist in the classroom laboratory. The case method drives robust class deliberations in which students take divergent viewpoints and debate an issue thoroughly.

My class style eschews the lecture format. Lectures can feel like a passive learning approach, with the instructor feeding the students information. My approach is more akin to an orchestra performance, with me playing the conductor role and every student's effort contributing to the symphony. The magic lies in each person playing their unique role in the concert and the whole being superior to what any one individual could produce. My goal is to create an active approach to learning with every student participating. When students engage, they are more likely to truly internalize the learning experience. This is why I so strongly recommend reading and thinking deeply about each class's case before the in-class experience and being fully ready to actively immerse yourself in the dialogue. In this way, better ideas are generated, and better arguments can be formulated and expressed. Your thoughts are valid and will make the class conversation more meaningful; there is no need to be diffident or anxious. Remember, this is our laboratory for experimentation and learning – I promise you nobody will ever be made to feel like their contributions are not worthy. Research points in the direction that adult students favor a learning style of doing³ – in our case, stepping into the protagonist's shoes and partaking in class.

Furthermore, I know some students have trepidation about speaking up in class. I might not be able to fully assuage your fears, but if you aspire to be a leader, entrepreneur, or a CEO, I assure you that articulating your thoughts coherently and persuasively will be a crucial skill to develop. Leaders, entrepreneurs, and CEOs need to speak convincingly with investors, creditors, employees, vendors, regulators, media outlets, and of course, customers. If you desire to be a successful and robust leader, entrepreneur, or CEO, practice your elocution in class.

For a more detailed view of my pedagogical style and approach, please see [On the Nature of Teaching in an MBA Program](#).



Georgyi Vekhov (Yale School of Management 2020) is the founder of [Milestone Capital](#), the first Russia-based search fund. When he started his MBA journey, Vekhov knew that he wanted to pursue entrepreneurship – he wanted the opportunity to lead, create wealth, and generate impact in Russia, his home country. Vekhov was a Silver Scholar at Yale and spent time at Boston Consulting Group, an international consulting firm, in the gap between his first and second year. Additionally, before Yale, he did a stint at Blade, a midsize, Moscow B2B importer, and distributor of 20 plus consumer electronics brands employing approximately 300 people. Vekhov also started and exited an online business that sold bedsheets. Vekhov took [Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition](#) and [Rollups, Consolidations and Programmatic Acquisitions](#) with A. J. Wasserstein while at Yale. He independently audited [Leading Small and Medium Enterprises](#) and [Patterns in Entrepreneurship](#) by watching all of the pre-recorded sessions (the former while still at Yale and the latter after his graduation).

A. J.'s classes at Yale were challenging and enlightening for me. I learned a lot about new entrepreneurial career paths, like search funds. The workload in A. J.'s classes is intense, but I am glad I threw myself into the courses. I learned a ton and felt ready to launch my entrepreneurial journey. We had several protagonist guests in my classes, and I reached out to some of them after class and began to build my professional network, which helped me launch my search fund.

I really enjoyed my class experience with A. J. I appreciate the financial analysis we did in each case. Doing this repetitively helped me hone this habit for life. Yale has such a diverse community, and, because we were pushed to share our thoughts in class, I learned so much from all my classmates. To get the most out of A. J.'s classes, you really need to prepare for each session. The classes are fun, with lots of conflicting discussion and analysis. It's very lively. But to be a participant, you really can't be shy or shirk the preparation.

A. J. has been a valuable mentor to me. After the winter break in my second year, when I was building my search fund network, I met him almost bi-weekly. He gave me advice and even made valuable introductions. With A. J., your effort always gets you value. If you just reach out to him, he goes above and beyond to help.

How you can maximize your educational experience

You need to know what you want to get out of my course. Each student enrolled in my course will have slightly different learning objectives. For example, some students might want to firm up their discounted cash flow analysis and valuation skills, while others might want to better understand what economic characteristics make an industry desirable. To help discover your key learning objectives for the course, thoroughly read the syllabus and highlight what you want to focus on. All my syllabi have detailed learning objectives; this is my deliverable promise to you, but you need to define where you want to focus your energy specifically. When crafting the syllabus document, I include a section that briefly outlines the key concepts and insights you should expect to learn. It is worthwhile to read through these carefully and further consider your expectations from the course. In addition, I urge you to create a personal learning plan that you can refer to as the course progresses. This will enable you to track your learning and alert you to any gaps in your overall understanding. If such a gap occurs, you can reach out to me to jointly resolve the issue. Knowing what you want out of my course is akin to having an exact destination as you set out on a journey – you need to know where you are going to be able to get there.

Each class session poses three ways to maximize your learning opportunity: what you do before class to prepare for the session, what you do while in class, and what you do after the class session.



Pre-class preparation

The most critical part of your scholastic opportunity is thoroughly preparing for each class session. The following five suggestions will enable you to maximize the benefits of preparation and optimize your learning opportunity. Typically, students will need a full two to four hours to prepare adequately for our in-class time together. Preparing for class in advance is the foundation of your pedagogical experience. The in-person time enhances the pre-class prep work and brings it to life, but it is not a substitute for the advance preparation.

The single best way to prepare for class is to read the assigned case deeply. I am not suggesting a quick skim during the short break before class; rather, I advocate for a slow and methodical read with active annotation of key concepts and questions. When reading the case, attempt to laser in on the correct information. Every case has too much information on some themes and not enough on others (this is what being an entrepreneur and CEO feels like too). Look at the case exhibits. Often, a trove of information is buried in the exhibits to help solve the case conundrum. I urge you not to ignore the optional and supplemental readings. These readings are often tools you can apply to the case or provide a framework to explore the case analysis. Skipping the additional readings will prevent optimizing the educational opportunity contained within the assigned case.

Each class session has a pre-class survey. Thoughtfully complete the survey in advance of class and contemplate the questions posed in it. These are likely the subjects we will actively discuss in class together. As you complete the survey, be prepared to be called on in class and defend why you selected the answer you did.

Review the syllabus for the question prompts associated with the assigned case. Think about the prompts and jot down some notes to answer them. We will discuss the prompts in class, and having thought about coherent replies in advance will make our conversation more robust and drive your academic experience. In addition, it is ethical and appropriate for you to collaborate with peers prior to class to discuss the assigned prompts. Such a conversation will likely make you rethink your positions and enhance your learning.

If there is a mathematical analysis opportunity, do it. Too often, students want to debate the strategy of a course of action in a case without actually solving the salient financial metrics within the case and understanding the economic implications. This is akin to a pilot covering the instrument gauges during a flight and exclusively piloting a plane by intuition. If you do the math, you can choose to ignore it or question it, but you should be looking at all of your instrument gauges – do the math and reflect on the insights the numbers offer you. The math we will do is not hard. It is mostly arithmetic. The logic and assumptions in the computation can be complex and vexing, but there is no need to fear the math itself. Once you have done the math and subsequent analysis, you are free, of course, to accept or reject the story they offer; but the process itself cannot be dismissed or avoided.

Finally, define what you want to get out of the class session as you prepare for class. What do you want to clarify or learn, and what tools and concepts will this class session bring to your course learning objectives? If your learning objectives for the class session are not met, I warmly encourage you to see me to mutually address why. It is also a good idea to occasionally refer to your original course goals to track your learning progress and be aware of how each session contributes to them.



In-class engagement

The class conversation is the heart of the learning experience and is designed to be meaningful, fulfilling, and rich, but this will only occur if all the participants have prepared rigorously and are ready to engage. If you attend class without being fully prepared, the experience will be somewhat empty and hollow. Our time together in class is for dynamic analysis and conversation. Although I take my role and responsibility as an educator seriously, this does not preclude class from being lively, fun, and even funny. I aim to make our class time together enjoyable. The following are five suggestions that can make our in-class time and discussion highly rewarding for you.

The classroom is a collaborative space, and collaboration starts with actively listening to your peers and to me. Come to class with an open mind. The case method and proper preparation foster vibrant class discussions that birth diverse views. Be open to alternative opinions shared by your peers and allow the class debate to challenge the views you came in with.

Collaboration also requires you to engage and contribute your thoughts and analysis. The class is for you to think, articulate, and debate the riddles and decision points in the case. Ask questions and do not be shy about responding to my questions (I ask far more questions than I answer in my Socratic approach to the conversation, and I aspire to be a net listener in class compared to a net talker). When sharing in class, you are expected to avoid expounding unfounded opinions and regurgitating case facts. Instead, you should provide your individual assertion and ensure that you support these insights with quantitative and qualitative analysis. This practice will sharpen your reasoning skills and allow you to discern any gaps in your understanding.

In the collaborative class, be prepared to be stretched and pushed intellectually. This is your chance to grow and learn. I will intentionally challenge you mathematically and logically. I will pressure test your comments and assertions – and I will ask your peers to do the same. This will force you to engage in deeper thinking and understanding of the class material. Remember, the classroom is our laboratory and is an excellent place to test and experiment with a high and protective safety net. This is the perfect environment to test drive an idea or venture out on your intellectual ledge and be wrong – the consequences are low.

Periodically I invite the case protagonist to the class to add value to our debate. A small portion of our class time is reserved for you to interact with them directly. **So, as you prepare for class, think about what you might ask the protagonist if you have the opportunity.** They have many valuable lessons to share, and their openness brings the case to life. This is a terrific opportunity for you to ask probing questions, learn from their experiences, and build your network. As you interact, do keep in mind that, while their opinions will be illuminating, they do not confer correctness – you should apply the same filter of personal critique to these interactions as you do to the class debate.

Finally, I always encourage students to keep a learning journal of key takeaways and insights from the discussion. These are not detailed notes from the specific case. Instead, they are the broad and big ideas that are generalizable and universal that you hope to internalize for a long period of time. I know notetaking is an individualistic habit, and I am not suggesting you prioritize this over listening and contributing, but the journey of self-discovery each of you will undertake is an incremental process over the full duration of the course. I hope you will keep challenging and refining your insights and preferences as the course progresses. I believe it will be helpful and valuable for you to have your realizations easily available for you to refer back to after class.



Post-class activities

The scholastic process does not need to end when the class does. After the case discussion, there are several chances to further cement the class conversation's learning. Detailed below are five ways to extend the academic opportunity.

Continue the conversation with your peers in the hallway or at lunch. Ask your peers what they learned in the class session and what surprised them the most. Ask them what themes resonated deeply with them and what is still unclear or confusing. Your peers are an excellent resource to intensify and crystalize the session's key topics.

I will close each class session with a ponder question – a final query to catalyze a bit more thinking and analysis on your part. **Think about the ponder question and how you would answer it.** Would you have responded to the question differently before class? How much did the class conversation affect your answer, and why?

One potent way to solidify the academic benefits from class is to find twenty minutes later in the day to review your class notes, the follow-up email I will share, and the class slides – including the key takeaways. This will help you synthesize the class conversation in a quiet mode. Try to assess what resonates most with you and why. Evaluate which tools you see as most valuable and how you plan to use them as a leader. Do some self-reflection on the protagonist's entrepreneurial and leadership style – does it appeal to you or not, and why? Think deeply about what you would want to mimic in their style and what you would want to shed.

Connect with me once or a few times outside of class (I am delighted to meet with you as frequently as you would like). This is an opportunity to engage in a one-on-one bespoke conversation to enrich your course learning. I am willing to give you as much of my support as you request from me. Additionally, if you connect with me outside of class, I can get to know you better and understand your academic, professional, and personal goals. This will allow me to better tailor the class conversation to your needs. For example, if you want to improve your financial analysis skills, I will engage you on this topic in class. Sure, it will be hard and maybe even uncomfortable, but you will grow and improve if you exercise the skill. Furthermore, if we connect outside of class, you will get to know me better and understand my business and life philosophies and how they influence the course program. Finally, I have helped many students secure internships and jobs, and I am thrilled to do so, but I cannot help you unless I know you and you ask for help.

Finally, if a particular case resonates strongly with you, you may even ask me to connect you with the case protagonist. Going this extra mile can boost your professional network and even lead to transformational business opportunities. But, again, the breadth of value you uncover at this stage relies purely on the effort you put in. Most protagonists are receptive to connecting with students and helping them. After all, every protagonist was once in your spot – at the beginning of their pilgrimage.



Susannah Burrage (Yale School of Management 2019) is a senior associate at [Innosight](#), a Boston-based strategy consulting firm. Before Yale, Burrage was at the social enterprise First Book, where she designed creative corporate partnerships that aggregate the purchasing power of underserved communities to increase the quantity and affordability of multicultural books. Earlier, at the consulting firm Community Wealth Partners, she facilitated multi-stakeholder conversations that empowered non-profit organizations, foundations, and communities to set aspirational goals and build strategies to achieve them. While at Yale, Burrage took two courses with A. J. Wasserstein – [Leading Small and Medium Enterprises](#) and [Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition](#).

I went to business school to explore how to build sustainable business models that deliver products and services to previously overlooked and underserved customers. What are the tradeoffs between tackling this question from the bottom up (i.e., being entrepreneurial and scaling) or the top-down (i.e., launching new projects within large companies)? I am continuing to toggle between these two approaches, and everything I learned in A.J.'s classes has been relevant to each step on my journey.

I took A. J.'s classes because they have a reputation for being approachable and practically applicable. He sets up classes and homework such that it's easy to follow along, learn the basics, and then stretch yourself. You're taught how to walk before you try to run. This was extremely useful for someone like me trying to learn the fundamentals of running a healthy and successful business. Like many of my friends at Yale, I went into consulting after Yale, where every day, I apply the concepts I learned with A. J. while also continuing to explore opportunities to pursue more entrepreneurial paths.

To get the most out of A. J.'s classes, you really need to let your guard down and fully lean in. I enjoyed the way A. J. coaxed us into the conversation to discover our voice and find answers. He helped me break down the complex problems we wrestled with in class into manageable steps. This only works if you are willing to be vulnerable and do the work before class – especially the mathematical analysis. I also liked the way we did a pre-class survey for each session. It forced me to walk into the room with a position and an opinion on the case. At the same time, I needed to leave space to hear differing points of view from my classmates during the conversation. I got a lot out of A. J.'s classes, and the more I put into the courses, the more I got out of them.

The learning opportunity with A. J. does not end in the classroom. I discussed the class content with my friends after class and learned more. A. J. has also been helpful to me after graduating. I've often connected with him to get advice on practical problems and even used him as a sounding board for debt versus equity decisions in small business financing and healthcare startups I am working on. I can always reach out to A. J. to point me in the right direction or towards useful resources. I highly recommend taking the time to build a relationship with him.

Final thoughts

I hope this note and the themes I have touched upon help you thrive in my courses and better prepare you to be an entrepreneur and CEO. Ultimately, these guidelines are suggestions; consider them a map to navigate the courses. And remember, the more you put into the course, the more the course will give back to you. I am your partner on your academic odyssey, but you own your educational opportunity and results. I cannot do it for you, but we can absolutely do it together.

Imagine my classroom as a place of rehearsal and engagement, a space for you to try out your ideas, and a place to take intellectual risks. I am here to maximize your time, facilitate conversations, and help you grow as a student and aspiring entrepreneur. Focus on the process of the course rather than getting a right answer. Use the time and adventure to find your leadership voice, philosophy, and style. Your effort is what matters most. I mean that. My classroom is an incubator for individual and professional growth, where you learn new skills and discover existing abilities. Come into the classroom ready to play, have fun, and engage with your peers and with the course material.

My courses involve hard work. You will need to prepare for each session, and you will be pushed and will often feel challenged in class. Do not fear the effort it requires; rather, you should embrace it. Remember, the struggle is temporary; the rewards, however, are permanent and yours to keep! Despite the work required, I hope that you feel energized and better off for having been in each class session and the entire course. I am absolutely not prone to hubris, but my aim is for my courses to be transformational and introduce you to a new way of thinking about business and maybe even life. So, lean in and gorge yourself

at the intellectual buffet. Let's make the most of our time together. I am here for you, and I am invested in your growth and success. I am rooting for you and excited to learn and work with you as you ready yourself to be a leader in business and society.

See you in class!

This case has been developed for pedagogical purposes. The case is not intended to furnish primary data, serve as an endorsement of the organization in question, or illustrate either effective or ineffective management techniques or strategies.

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Endnotes

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³ Lucardie, Dorothy. "The Impact of Fun and Enjoyment on Adult's Learning." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 142, Aug. 2014. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814046242, 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.696.