

The Definitive YC Application Playbook (2024-2026 Era)

Compiled from YC partner blog posts, public interviews, successful application examples, alumni case studies, and the official YC application guidance. Every recommendation below is sourced.

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1. How YC Partners Actually Read Your Application

The Process

YC's Admissions Team reviews tens of thousands of applications per batch. There is no secret machine learning model. It is people reading applications, aided by custom software that lets them read quickly, flag questions for founders, and decide who to interview.

Source: [Inside YC: The Admissions Team](#)

What Partners Are Scanning For

Garry Tan (YC President/CEO) stated that when reading applications, partners want to understand two things: 1. **Who is the applicant's potential customer?** 2. **What have the founders built?**

Partners look for "first principles thinkers" -- people who believe what no one else believes yet AND figure out the necessary steps to build their vision.

Source: [Garry Tan's secret sauce for getting into YC \(TechCrunch, May 2024\)](#)

The Mindset of the Reader

From YC's official "How to Apply" page:

"The best answers are matter of fact. Marketing-speak to make your idea sound more exciting is a mistake -- we're immune to it. What we look for in ideas is not the type of idea, but the level of insight you have about it."

"The best answers are specific. Generic claims carry no weight. A single specific example is much more convincing."

Partners skim. They read hundreds of applications per day. If a partner only reads your first sentence, they should get all the information they need.

Source: [How to Apply to Y Combinator](#)

The "Bet Against" Framework

When YC reads an application, they ask themselves: "**Would I bet against this person?**" Even if they would never want to build the company themselves, if the founder seems unstoppable, that is a signal.

2. The "What Does Your Company Do?" Framework

The Formula

Your answer must cover four elements in 2-3 sentences:

1. **WHAT** you do (the product)
2. **WHO** it is for (the customer)
3. **WHY** they need it (the problem)

4. **HOW** you are different (the insight / secret sauce)

The Cardinal Sin

"The biggest mistake founders make is to confuse the reader. Half the time when reviewing applications, [partners] are thinking 'I have no idea what this person is even talking about.'"

Rule: Explain it like you would to your grandmother. No jargon. No buzzwords.

What NOT to Do

From YC's official guidance:

"Avoid starting with vague phrases like 'transform the relationship between individuals and information' -- it conveys nothing and could describe any technology company."

"It's a common mistake to say your solution will be distinctive because it's well-designed and easy to use. That's just claiming you'll execute well, rather than demonstrating genuine insight."

Real Examples That Worked

Dropbox (W07):

"Dropbox synchronizes files across your/your team's computers. It's much better than uploading or email, because it's automatic, integrated into Windows, and fits into the way you already work. There's also a web interface, and the files are securely backed up to Amazon S3. Dropbox is kind of like taking the best elements of subversion, trac and rsync and making them 'just work' for the average individual or team. Hackers have access to these tools, but normal people don't."

Why it works: Instantly clear product, clear user, clear differentiation, uses analogy to known tools.

Source: [Dropbox's original YC application](#)

The Structure

[One sentence: What you make and for whom]

[One sentence: Why it's better than alternatives]

[One sentence: The unique insight or technology angle]

Keep it under 200 characters for the short answer version (YC expanded from 120 to 200 chars in 2025). For the longer description, 2-5 sentences max.

3. The "Why This Idea / Why You" Strategy

What YC Is Really Asking

This question tests **founder-market fit**: Do you have a strong expertise or personal connection to the problem you are solving?

The Three Layers

1. **Personal pain or observation** -- You experienced the problem firsthand, not theoretically.
2. **Domain expertise** -- Your background makes you uniquely qualified.
3. **Market insight** -- You see something others do not.

The winning formula: **Personal connection + market insight = strongest "why."**

How to Demonstrate Founder-Market Fit

Be prepared to answer: - Why did you pick this specific idea? - Do you have domain expertise in this area? - How do you know people need what you are making? - What have you learned from talking to users/customers?

What Garry Tan Looks For

In a 2024 interview, Tan said all of the founders he chose to fund in recent interviews "came in with some new discovery that they had discovered interacting with the technology itself." The example he gave: a founder who discovered a robotics manufacturer making a humanoid robot for \$16,000 and planned to be the first to commercialize it.

The key: **You discovered something by doing, not by reading a market report.**

Source: [TechCrunch: Garry Tan's secret sauce](#)

4. Presenting Competitors Effectively

The Structure

The competitors question has multiple dimensions. You should categorize competitors into:

1. **Large incumbents** -- Major industry players who need disrupting

2. **The old way of doing things** -- Fractional solutions that get "stitched together"
3. **Other startups** -- Direct competitors with venture funding or market attention

The Cardinal Rule

Never say "We have no competitors."

YC considers this a red flag. It signals either naivete about your market or dishonesty.

What to Do Instead

For each competitor or competitor set: - **Name specific companies** (not vague categories) - **Clarify where they are missing the mark** in serving the market - **Keep it to 3-5 sentences total** - **Back your differentiation with data when possible**

The Insight Question

The question "What do you understand about your business that other companies don't?" is asking for your **critical secret** -- the non-obvious insight that makes your approach likely to win.

Successful examples from accepted applications:

"Customer convenience trumps all other characteristics of a repair service. Appliances are critical machinery requiring immediate care, but repair businesses don't treat them as emergencies -- they architect their entire business around a queue system."

"Making Growth teams dependent on engineers is a lose-lose setup. A no-code data overlay gives speed and autonomy to Growth teams and frees engineers to focus where they have the most impact."

Source: [32 Successful YCombinator Application Examples](#)

5. Communicating Traction When Pre-Revenue

The Good News

On average, **40% of the companies YC funds in each batch are just an idea**. Most don't have any revenue. The majority of companies they fund are at the very earliest stage.

Source: [YC FAQ](#)

The Principle: Show Momentum, Not Absolute Numbers

"We have 1,000 users" is far less impressive than "We grew from 0 to 1,000 users in 8 weeks."

Investors fund momentum, not absolute numbers. Always include timeframes.

What to Include (Pre-Revenue)

Stick to **facts** only. This is where most applicants add fluff.

- Date you launched your MVP
- Number of users / weekly active users
- Waitlist signups
- Letters of intent (LOIs) from potential customers
- Pilot commitments
- R&D milestones achieved
- User interviews completed (with insights showing willingness to pay)
- Speed of iteration: "We built X in Y weeks"

The Lago Example (Accepted Pre-Product, Pre-Revenue)

Lago (YC S21) had no product when they applied. But they had: - Completed a customer discovery phase - Generated 70+ inbound requests from startups before even having a landing page - Bootstrapped an email course that generated 600+ qualified leads

Their lesson: **"You need to prove you're executing and iterating fast and that you have an unfair advantage: you know something unique about your problem space."**

Source: [Lago: How we got into YC, pre-product, pre-revenue](#)

What NOT to Do

Do not go into "persuasion mode." Do not write what you believe will happen. Write what HAS happened. Data beats promises every time.

6. Revenue Model Presentation

Format

2-5 sentences. Concise. Concrete.

What to Include

If you have revenue:

Launched our product/MVP on [DATE].
Have \$[X]K in annual recurring revenue.
Have [Z] Weekly Active Users (WAU).

If pre-revenue: - State your pricing model clearly - Reference comparable pricing in your market - Show that you have validated willingness to pay (even from conversations)

Best Practices from YC Data

- **Tiered pricing outperforms flat pricing 3:1** in YC B2B cohorts
- **Usage-based components** (e.g., % of GMV, per-seat) signal alignment with customer success
- Target **LTV:CAC of 3.5-5:1** and **gross margins of 75-82%**
- Keep the math visible and simple

Note on Dynamic Questions

YC's application adjusts based on your inputs. If you respond "No" to "Do you have revenue?", revenue-related follow-up questions will not appear. Be honest -- YC knows most early-stage companies are pre-revenue.

Source: [YC guide to business models](#)

7. Market Size Without Being Generic

The Bottom-Up Rule

Never pull a trillion-dollar number from a consulting report and call it your TAM.

Instead, use a **bottom-up calculation** tied to real customer spend:

"There are 200,000 independent gyms in the U.S. They each spend \$15,000 per year on management tools. That's a \$3B market."

"With 30 million small businesses in the U.S. alone, and an average payment processing fee of \$100/month, our TAM stands at \$3 billion annually."

The Formula

[Number of target customers] x [What they pay annually for this type of solution] = TAM

Include SAM and SOM

- **TAM** = Total addressable market (the full universe)
- **SAM** = Serviceable addressable market (who you can realistically reach)
- **SOM** = Serviceable obtainable market (who you will capture in the near term)

Top-down TAM without realistic SAM/SOM is a credibility killer.

Make Your Math Transparent

The math should be visible but simple. Show that you have done the thinking, not that you have built a model for show. YC and Eric Ries caution founders against using inflated TAM numbers to dazzle investors.

8. The 1-Minute Video

Official Requirements

From YC's video page:

"The video should be 1 minute long and should contain nothing except the founders talking. In it, you should introduce yourselves, explain what you're doing and why, and tell us anything else you want to about the founders or the project."

Source: [The Application Video \(Y Combinator\)](#).

The Structure (10-20-20-10 Framework)

Based on YC alum Nick Raushenbush's recommended format:

Segment	Seconds	Content
Hook	0-10	Who you are, what you do (one sentence)
Problem	10-30	The problem and why it matters
Solution	30-50	What you built and why it works
Why You	50-60	Why your team will win

What Makes It Compelling

1. **First 10 seconds must hook** -- State what you do immediately
2. **Show the product working** -- Not slides, not mockups, the actual product
3. **Founder energy and conviction** matter more than production quality

4. **Good lighting, clear audio, look at the camera**
5. **Authenticity over polish** -- YC is not looking for a Super Bowl ad

What to Avoid

- Slides or deck presentations
- Background music
- Overly scripted delivery
- Over-produced visuals
- Anything that is not founders talking

Is It Optional?

While not required, **submitting a video significantly increases your chances of being interviewed**. Do not skip it.

Pro Tip

Upload a tiny, unlisted Loom walkthrough of your product (30 seconds) and link it somewhere in your application. Video beats superlatives.

9. The Equity Split Question

YC's Clear Position

"Equity should be split equally because all the work is ahead of you."

"Startups are more likely to fail if the founders do not split equity equally."

Source: [Michael Seibel: How to split equity among founders](#)

The Reasoning

- It takes 7-10 years to build a company of great value
- Small variations in year one do not justify massively different equity splits in years 2-10
- More equity = more motivation; more motivated founders = higher chance of success
- **The #1 reason for cofounder breakups** in recent YC batches was cofounders trying to renegotiate a previously agreed equity split

Acceptable Variations

- **51/49** or giving one founder an extra share is considered "essentially equal" by YC -- it signals who stays if the team splits
- Founders must have **at least 10% equity** each

What to Write

Be transparent. State the split clearly. If it is equal (or near-equal), that is ideal. If it is unequal, explain why briefly and honestly. Do not try to hide an unequal split.

YC notes this question is "as much for you as us" -- if you have not determined equity splits, do it before applying.

Source: [YC: How to split equity among co-founders](#)

10. What "Formidable Founders" Means

Paul Graham's Definition

In his essays, Paul Graham defined what VCs want to see in founders:

1. **Formidable founders** (primary)
2. **A promising market** (secondary)
3. **Some evidence of prior success** (tertiary)

The key qualities, ranked by importance:

Quality	Why It Matters
Determination	The #1 predictor. Once above a threshold of intelligence, determination is what separates winners.
Flexibility	Can you adapt when your first idea does not work?
Imagination	Can you see possibilities others cannot?
Naughtiness	Do you like to beat the system? (See: the Hack question)
Friendship	Do the cofounders genuinely work well together?

Note: **Intelligence did not make the top five.** Graham found that once founders are above a certain threshold, intelligence is not the differentiator.

"Relentlessly Resourceful"

Paul Graham's most famous essay on founders distilled the key trait to two words: **"relentlessly resourceful."**

"Make something people want is the destination, but be relentlessly resourceful is how you get there."

The startups that did best were ones with founders about whom YC said: "**They can take care of themselves.**" If someone lets you down, you find a way to achieve your goal without them.

Source: [Paul Graham: Relentlessly Resourceful](#)

How to Signal This in Your Application

- Show **extraordinary achievements** (it is not the type, but the magnitude that matters)
- Demonstrate you have **already started building** before applying
- Show you are a **doer**, not a planner
- Reference concrete actions, not intentions

From YC's official guide:

"It's not the type of achievement that matters so much as the magnitude. Succeeding in a startup is extraordinary, and we look for people able to do extraordinary things."

11. The "Hack" Question

The Question

"Please tell us about the time you most successfully hacked some (non-computer) system to your advantage."

Why It Exists

From Paul Graham:

"The most successful founders tend to have a piratical gleam in their eye. They're not Goody Two-Shoes type good. While they care about getting the big questions right morally, they don't necessarily care about observing proprieties."

This is a **wildcard** question. A good answer can make partners take a second look at an otherwise unpromising application. Some interview invitations have been based primarily on answers to this question.

Real Examples from Accepted Founders

1. **Recruitment arbitrage:** A founder spotted that engineers cost \$20K to recruit but \$100 was significant money to college students. They created a tough coding challenge that paid \$100 to winners, then asked winners if they might be interested in applying to jobs.
2. **Global travel hack:** A founder traveled 77 days around the world paying for only one hotel room by staying with friends, and talked their way onto a plane that departed 12 minutes after arriving at the airport.
3. **The tooth fairy experiment:** From the YC book "Launchpad" -- an applicant disproved the existence of the tooth fairy by secretly placing a tooth under their pillow without parental knowledge to see if she would come.

How to Answer

- The answer needs to be impressive AND something you are "proud of"
- It should be something that is not quite "right" -- if it were perfectly proper, it would not be a "hack"
- It demonstrates **hustle and creative problem-solving** in real life
- It does not have to be unethical, but it should show you found a non-obvious path

Source: [Shizune: Successful answers to the hack question](#)

12. Common Mistakes That Get Applications Rejected

The Four Pillars of Rejection

Every rejection means you failed to convince on one of four pillars:

1. **Team** -- Why are YOU the right people?
2. **Idea** -- Is this a real problem worth solving?
3. **Traction** -- Have you done anything to prove this works?
4. **Clarity** -- Can the partner even understand what you are saying?

Your job is to self-diagnose which one is weakest and fix it.

Mistake 1: Confusing the Reader

The single most common reason. Half the time partners cannot tell what the company does. If your grandmother would not understand your description, rewrite it.

Mistake 2: Fluff Over Facts

"Applications that stand out are the ones that spare the partner the task of having to separate the data from the fluff."

Applications fail because "ideas are long and vague, and there is practically zero proof that the founders can execute."

Mistake 3: Pursuing "Fashionable" Ideas

Dalton Caldwell warns:

"Founders feel both implicit and explicit pressure to work on something fashionable. Often when someone gets into YC, they need to change their idea because they weren't pursuing the idea that's right under their nose where they're the world's expert."

Mistake 4: Concealing Flaws

From YC's official guidance:

"It's better to disclose all flaws in your idea than conceal them. We assume unmentioned problems haven't been thought through, and we care more about the founders than the idea."

Mistake 5: Claiming No Competitors

See section 4. This signals you do not understand your market.

Mistake 6: Trying Backdoor Channels

Dalton Caldwell explicitly states:

"You just apply. You don't need permission, you don't need warm intros. Watch out for fake gatekeepers that claim they can help you get into YC. People claim they have some inside angle or are alumni, but that's not a real thing."

Cold emails, decks sent outside the application, or networking your way in does not work. The application is the application.

Mistake 7: Over-Engineering the Application

"You don't need to spend dozens of hours on the application, don't need to contact 30 alumni, and there's no great correlation between spending tons of time on your application and actually getting in. Many of the folks that get in just apply."

Source: [Dalton Caldwell: How to get into Y Combinator \(TechCrunch\)](#)

Mistake 8: Insufficient Traction (for B2B in 2025)

In 2025, "MVP in private beta" is table stakes. Not having paying users is a significant rejection reason for B2B products specifically.

13. The Difference Between Good and Great Applications

Good Applications

- Clear description of the product
- Competent team with relevant experience
- Some understanding of the market
- Correct answers to all questions

Great Applications

Great applications have all of the above, PLUS:

1. **A non-obvious insight** -- Something the partner has not heard before. Garry Tan said all the founders he funded recently "came in with some new discovery that they had discovered interacting with the technology itself."
2. **Evidence of extraordinary action** -- Not plans, but things already done. The most impressive applications show founders who have already started building, talking to customers, and generating traction.
3. **Clarity that makes the partner's job easy** -- The application reads effortlessly. No decoding required. Every sentence carries weight.
4. **Honest about weaknesses** -- Great applications acknowledge risks and flaws. This paradoxically builds trust.
5. **A sense of inevitability** -- The reader finishes thinking "This person is going to build this whether or not we fund them."

Michael Seibel's Insight

"Most smart people put themselves in a group of smart people and perform average -- a winning strategy in most contexts. That approach doesn't work in the startup world where success looks different."

The best founders figure out how to differentiate from the crowd, not blend in.

The Relate.so Case Study

Relate.so applied to YC **five times** before getting in on the sixth attempt. What changed:

- They stopped pitching theoretical ideas and **got paying customers first**
- Eight companies signed up for their pre-product, early access deal (paying a few hundred dollars each)
- They continued building and adding customers between rejection and reapplication
- Core lesson: "**Get paying customers ASAP, work hard to keep them, don't bullshit, and know your business.**"

Source: [What We Learned From Our Five Failed YC Applications and One Successful One](#)

14. How the Application Connects to the Interview

Your Application Is the Interview Agenda

Interviewers will have read your application and have it open during the call. The substance of what you wrote is front and center.

This means: Do not contradict your application. Do not present a different narrative. Build on it.

The Interview Format

- **10 minutes long**
- **3+ interviewers** asking rapid-fire questions
- Partners often **interrupt** -- this is normal and forces extreme conciseness
- No slides, no presentations

What YC Does NOT Want

"Founders don't need to do mock interview prep, and YC prefers that you don't prepare any kind of presentation. YC sometimes notices that founders overprepare, which does not increase the chances of their acceptance because it can make the interview more awkward."

The Best Preparation Is Not Preparation

From YC's official interview guide:

"The best way to get an edge is to work hard and have your startup improve between the time that you applied and the time that you interview. This may mean you launched, improved your product, increased revenue, etc."

The gap between application and interview is your chance to demonstrate velocity. If you can say "Since we applied three weeks ago, we added 50 users and launched feature X," that is more powerful than any rehearsed pitch.

What Carries Over

1. Your core narrative
2. Your traction numbers (partners will ask for updates)
3. Your competitor analysis
4. Your team dynamics
5. Any red flags or unclear points (they WILL ask about these)

Source: [YC Interview Guide](#)

15. 2025-2026 Era: What Changed

The AI Shift

The most dramatic shift in YC's portfolio is the explosion of **agentic AI** companies:

- **Spring 2025 batch:** 50%+ of 144 companies were building agentic AI
- **S24 batch:** 77% building in AI (up from 70% in W24)
- **Spring 2026 RFS #1:** "Cursor for X" -- AI agents that autonomously perform tasks

Garry Tan on X (2025):

"YC wants founders who treat AI agents not as features but as the core operating system of brand-new companies and industries."

Current Requests for Startups (2025-2026)

Key areas YC explicitly wants to fund:

- **AI-powered financial trading** -- Swarms of agents doing analyst/trader work
- **Government fraud detection** -- Modernizing investigation at scale
- **AI product management tools** -- "Cursor for PMs"
- **Vocational training for the AI economy** -- Personalized AI-driven trade education
- **Industrial modernization** -- American manufacturing, metal mills, supply chain
- **AI-native workflows** across every vertical

Source: [YC Requests for Startups](#)

The New Bar

- AI capabilities are now assumed to be **foundational, not supplementary**
- Founders without AI expertise face significant disadvantages in technical AI categories
- The strongest teams combine **domain experience + technical execution**
- AI-native tooling has compressed development timelines, enabling founders to tackle problems that would have required much larger teams two years ago

Process Changes (2025)

- Interview invites now go out in **weekly rolling waves** (not one big dump)
- **Applying early** means you can get a response in 10 days vs. 10 weeks
- Short-answer character limit expanded from 120 to **200 characters**
- **~30% of S24 had applied before** -- persistence is valued, and you should highlight what changed

YC Startup School

44% of admitted startups had previously completed the free online [YC Startup School](#). This is not required but is a strong signal of seriousness.

16. Real Application Examples

Dropbox (W07) -- The Gold Standard

What is your company going to make?

"Dropbox synchronizes files across your/your team's computers. It's much better than uploading or email, because it's automatic, integrated into Windows, and fits into the way you already work."

Source: [Dropbox's original YC application](#)

Companies with Publicly Available Applications

- **Dropbox** (W07) -- [YC's published example](#)
- **GitLab** -- [Public application breakdown](#)
- **Buffer** -- [Published their rejected application](#) (instructive to see what did NOT work)
- **Apptimize** -- [Application analysis](#)
- **Relate.so** -- [Five failures + one success](#)
- **Lago** -- [Pre-product, pre-revenue acceptance](#)

Database

A searchable database of 32+ successful YC applications is available at shizune.co/yc-application-examples, organized by question.

17. Source Links

Official YC Resources

- [How to Apply to Y Combinator](#)
- [The Application Video](#)
- [YC Interview Guide](#)
- [YC FAQ](#)
- [Apply to YC](#)
- [Requests for Startups \(2025-2026\)](#)
- [Inside YC: The Admissions Team](#)
- [Common Misconceptions About Applying to YC](#)
- [YC Guide to Business Models](#)
- [How to Split Equity Among Co-Founders](#)

YC Partner Content

- [Garry Tan's secret sauce for getting into YC \(TechCrunch, 2024\)](#)
- [Garry Tan's tips for applying to YC \(YC Library\)](#)
- [Dalton Caldwell: How to get into YC \(TechCrunch\)](#)
- [Dalton Caldwell: Lessons from 1,000+ YC startups \(Lenny's Newsletter\)](#)
- [Michael Seibel: How to split equity among founders](#)
- [Dalton & Michael: Where do great startup ideas come from?](#)

- [Dalton & Michael: The truth about Y Combinator](#)

Paul Graham Essays

- [Relentlessly Resourceful](#)
- [A Word to the Resourceful](#)
- [Why YC](#)

Application Examples and Case Studies

- [Dropbox's original YC application](#)
- [32 Successful YC Application Examples \(Shizune\)](#)
- [Buffer's Rejected YC Application](#)
- [Relate.so: Five failed YC applications and one successful one](#)
- [Lago: How we got into YC, pre-product, pre-revenue](#)
- [Nick Raushenbush: YC Application Breakdown and Guide](#)

Guides and Analysis

- [Flowjam: YC Application Tips 2025](#)
- [Leland: YC Application Guide](#)
- [How to have an outstanding YC application \(UC Berkeley\)](#)
- [YC Application Examples: Dropbox, GitLab, Buffer, Apptimize](#)
- [Getting Into YC Isn't That Hard. Or Is It?](#)
- [5 key elements of a successful YC application \(Michael Seibel\)](#)

YC YouTube / Video

- [Dalton & Michael series \(YC Library\)](#)
- [Garry Tan's Channel \(YC Library\)](#)
- [Paul Graham Essays \(YC Library\)](#)

Quick Reference: The Application Checklist

BEFORE YOU WRITE:

- Read your competitors' products deeply (sign up, use them)
- Talk to 10+ potential customers
- Have something built (even if minimal)
- Know your numbers cold (users, growth rate, revenue if any)
- Watch 3+ Dalton & Michael YouTube videos

WHILE WRITING:

- Every answer passes the "grandmother test" (no jargon)
- First sentence of every answer carries the core message
- Facts and data, not promises and predictions
- Specific examples over generic claims
- Flaws disclosed, not hidden
- Under the word/character limits
- Written in your authentic voice

THE VIDEO:

- Under 60 seconds
- Founders only (no slides, no music, no effects)
- Product demo if possible
- Good lighting, clear audio
- Hook in first 10 seconds

BEFORE SUBMITTING:

- Have someone outside your industry read it -- do they understand?
- Remove all marketing language
- Check: does each answer add NEW information?
- Equity split is decided and documented
- Apply EARLY (rolling waves mean faster response)

BETWEEN APPLICATION AND INTERVIEW:

- Keep building -- ship features, add users, get revenue
- Track metrics weekly so you can show growth
- Do NOT over-prepare presentations
- Know your application answers cold (they will reference them)

Last updated: February 2026. Based on research from YC partner statements, official YC resources, and publicly shared application examples spanning 2007-2026.