

# YC Application Cheatsheet (2026)

What reviewers actually look for · [ycplaybook.xyz](https://ycplaybook.xyz)

## Q: What is your company going to make?

What they want: A jargon-free, 1-paragraph explanation. They read 20,000 of these. They want to understand in 15 seconds.

GOOD: We make a payment API for African e-commerce. 47 paying merchants, \$2.1M GMV/month.

BAD: We're building the future of fintech, leveraging AI and blockchain to revolutionize payments.

## Q: Why this idea? Domain expertise? How do you know people need it?

What they want: Personal connection + evidence. They sniff for fake passion and made-up demand.

GOOD: I worked at Stripe Atlas 3 yrs, helped 400+ African founders. Talked to 60 merchants; 38 said they'd pay \$200/mo.

BAD: We're passionate about emerging markets and the TAM is \$40B.

## Q: What's new? What substitutes do people use today?

What they want: Honest competitive analysis + 'before' state of the customer's day.

GOOD: Today merchants integrate 4-6 APIs. 6-week avg integration. Ours: 1 day. Wedge: unified USD settlement with auto-FX.

BAD: There are no real competitors. The space is wide open.

## Q: How will you make money? How much could you make?

What they want: A real revenue model. Math, not vibes.

GOOD: 2.9% + \$0.30/txn. Avg merchant \$50k GMV → \$1,750/mo rev. 10k merchants × \$1.7k = \$200M ARR opportunity.

BAD: We'll figure out monetization once we have users.

## Q: How long have you been working on it? Lines of code?

What they want: Evidence you ship. Weekend hackers > 6-month planners.

GOOD: 4 months. ~28k LOC. Live, 47 paying merchants, 99.7% uptime.

BAD: 18 months in stealth, finalizing architecture.

## Q: Tell us something surprising one of you discovered.

What they want: An insight you couldn't get without doing the work.

GOOD: 47% of merchants reconcile WhatsApp screenshots manually. One had a full-time employee for it.

BAD: We discovered the market is bigger than we thought.

## Universal Red Flags

- Saying 'no competitors exist' = instant rejection. They will Google for 30 sec and find 5.
- 'Top-down TAM' projections ("the market will be \$40B by 2030"). Use bottom-up math instead.
- Long timeline + no shipped product. 6 weeks of working code beats 2 years of slides.
- Buzzwords (revolutionize, leverage, synergy, vertically-integrated). Cut all of them.
- Generic answers to the 'surprising thing' question. That's the tell for whether you've actually talked to users.
- Resume-as-team-bio. They want chemistry and grit, not credentials.

## Application Submission Checklist

- Each answer < 600 chars. They skim.
- At least 3 specific numbers in the application (users, revenue, growth, interviews, LOC).
- 1-min Founder video — face on camera, shot in one take, no B-roll, no music.
- 1-min Product video — screen recording, show the user flow, no slides.
- Co-founder section completed for EVERY co-founder. Solo founder = harder, not impossible.
- Submit 2 weeks before deadline. Late apps get less reviewer attention.