

FAST-TRACK MCAT PREP TIPS

The comments below were submitted by career-changers who took the MCAT seven weeks after completing the one-year, cohort-based Post-Baccalaureate Health Professions program. Both earned competitive scores on the MCAT (523 & 521).

STUDENT A (523)

My Guiding Principles of MCAT Prep

- **Coursework should take priority.** Most of the MCAT content is covered during the courses taken by the students in the structured cohort program, and the single most important thing you can do to boost your score is to master the content in these courses. It's possible to start your dedicated study period off with a competitive score on your first practice test just by studying hard during the year.
- **Regular practice tests are non-negotiable.** Do them with no extra breaks, notes, or handicaps. These practice tests are crucial to help you 1) get comfortable with test logistics (snacks, bathroom breaks, etc) 2) learn test strategy (efficient passage reading, common question structures, pacing), and 3) most importantly, show you which topics you need to focus on. The MCAT covers a very wide breadth of content, and if you are not using your tests to guide your study schedule, you are flying blind.
- **New/unfamiliar content should be applied on the same day it is learned.** Especially early in the 7 weeks when more of your time is spent on content review, it is easy to convince yourself that you understand new content even if it's not fully grasped. For me, answering questions on that content helped cement the concepts and ensure I understood. In general, I'd cover 2-3 chapters of a Kaplan book in the morning when I was most sharp, then spend that afternoon doing practice questions on those chapters. UWorld was excellent for this as you can customize what topics it tests you on, and Kaplan also provided a 5-question passage after each chapter in its books.
- **Protected study time is important, but so is continuing to live life.** 7 weeks is a more than enough time to burn yourself out. Continuing to hang out with family/friends, sleep enough, work out, or do whatever else keeps you sane will pay dividends by allowing you to stay motivated and efficient during study time. I took two 3-day breaks/trips, tried to take a full day off per week, and had several days with just a couple hours of studying throughout the study period. Each time, I had more efficient full study days after these breaks.

My Step-by-Step Process

- Step 0 for me was to do 1-2 CARS passages per week during Spring semester. I'm not a strong reader and had heard that CARS can take longer to improve. It only took 10-15 mins per passage, and by the end of the semester, my CARS skills improved enough to not spend any time on this during the dedicated MCAT study period.
- Step 0.5 for me was to passively watch some psych/soc videos during Fall semester. I took no notes, usually watched while eating lunch, and just tried to get a first pass at the content. In my head, this was similar to pre-reading the textbook before a lecture. I'm not sure how much difference it made, but this should definitely NOT be done unless you feel you are mastering your course content and still have a bit of extra time.

- Day 1 of my dedicated study period was the full-length AAMC Unscored Sample Test, which you can roughly score using some online calculators. Day 2 was spent reviewing the test in the morning, getting oriented to study resources, and building a study plan.
- **Test review should be efficient.** This starts during the test. In order to make sure I still identified content gaps regardless of whether I got the question right or wrong, I would make a haphazard list in the corner of my scratch paper with every question # that I wasn't confident answering. During review, I reviewed all missed questions and all questions from this list even if I got them right.
 - My individual question review process was to first identify why I missed the question, which was for one of three reasons: A) misunderstood the passage b) misunderstood the question or c) did not know the content. If it was reason A or C, I tried to internalize the error during that moment. If it was due to content gap, I either made an Anki card for simple concepts/facts, or made a note to do in-depth review for more complex content.
 - This YouTube video is what I based my review strategy on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGdLFRFdKDK>
- Psychology/Sociology (P/S) was clearly my weakest subject. I spent the first 5-7 days reading the Kaplan P/S book from cover to cover. I read 2-3 chapters to start the day, then would do practice questions on those chapters' topics. I also used the P/S portion of the AnKing pre-made Anki deck daily throughout the whole study period. P/S ended up being my highest scoring section using these methods.
- Anatomy & Physiology (A&P) was also a major source of missed questions on my first 2 practice tests. After finishing the P/S book, I also read the Kaplan Biology book cover to cover at a 2-3 chapter per day pace, paired with practice questions to apply newly learned content. I also supplemented this with Khan Academy's videos for A&P topics that were hard to grasp.
- My rusty math skills were slowing my testing pace down and causing some missed questions, so I spent a couple hours watching MCAT math tip videos and doing practice questions. You should be comfortable multiplying & dividing in scientific notation, converting pH to/from pKa, and converting units. This ended up being very high-yield study time and increased my comfort level during practice tests.
- After finishing the P/S and Bio Kaplan books, the rest of my content review was guided solely by test review. I would read individual Kaplan chapters as needed and use UWorld to make practice tests covering only topics that I was struggling with. The farther along I got into the study period, the less time I spent on content review and more time went to practice questions. By the last few weeks, it was 90-95% practice questions with targeted content review as needed.

Topics I never studied or hardly studied during content review:

- CARS – I did 1-2 practice passages per week during Spring semester. By the dedicated study period, the only MCAT practice I needed was the full-length practice tests.
- Genetics – the course syllabus exceeded what I encountered on the MCAT.
- Biochemistry, with the exception of the KREB cycle, which was not covered in-depth during the course.
- OChem 1. Later in the study period after I had reviewed my bigger content gaps (psych/soc, anatomy & physiology), I did review some OChem 2, which was worthwhile.
- Physics – The concepts were not new, but I regularly reviewed Physics equations. I found the MCAT disproportionately liked questions about circuits, capacitance, and optics.

Resources I Used:

- **AAMC official materials:** The practice tests are gold and are miles ahead of 3rd party full-length tests. I found the AAMC Question Banks to be significantly harder than the actual test questions, but they are still a useful tool towards the end of the study period when you're ready for more advanced questions.

- **Anki:** I used 2 decks and tried to review them daily, though this was the first thing I would skip if pressed for time. The first was a personal deck that I made with formulas, factoids, and simple concepts that caused me to miss practice questions. I also made some cards in this deck while doing content review. The second deck was the P/S portion of the AnKing pre-made deck, which is frequently passed around for free among pre-meds.
- **UWorld:** UWorld is pricey, but it was my favorite resource by far because of how efficiently it enables you to do practice questions. The efficiency comes from UWorld's 1) ability to make short, targeted practice tests only covering topics you need to work on and 2) in-depth explanations of each answer and why it's right or wrong. The answer explanations save you the time it would take to go look up answers/concepts using other resources.
- **Kaplan:** I found their books to be well-organized and easy to digest. They include mnemonics and practice questions, and each chapter has a corresponding practice passage that lets you apply your newly learned content.
- **Jack Westin:** They have free CARS passages that were fairly representative of the real test.
- **Khan Academy Videos:** I used these supplementally if I felt like the Kaplan books' explanations were insufficient. I found the Anatomy & Physiology videos in particular to be helpful.
- **Blueprint:** I used one of their free full-length practice tests. It was way harder than any of the AAMC tests (including the real MCAT) and was fairly demoralizing. It was better than no practice test that week, but not by much. If you are going to use a 3rd party test, do it early in your study period (but after using an AAMC test for your initial diagnostic full-length).
- **Sketchy:** Sketchy is a video-based learning platform that I used to get a first pass at Psych/Soc content during Fall semester. I'm not sure it was worth the high cost, but Psych/Soc ended up being my best section, so it might've helped.

STUDENT B (521)

My Guiding Principles of MCAT Prep

- I followed the advice of others to do **one practice test each week**, and then spend the next day going over every question. That was the extent of my structure, and I allowed my weak areas on each practice test to inform the topics I would study over the next week.
- I **took every Saturday off**, and a couple additional weekends I took Sunday off as well. I think having enough rest was crucial to not getting burnt out. I also really tried to stop studying by around 6 pm.
- I put myself on the **same sleep schedule as test day** for the last month before I tested. I had a 6:30 a.m. start time, so that meant sleeping from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. every day.

My Step-by-Step Process

- My first step was to complete the AAMC Sample Test as a gauge of my preparation. I spent the next day going over it, and then I took two days off that weekend. I wish I'd taken a day off after finals, because I was pretty fried after my exams and it made the MCAT seem extra draining.
- After that, it was obvious that psych/soc and Gen Chem would be my most easily improved sections. I spent the next week and a half working through **every chapter of the Princeton Review Psych/Soc book and adding every key term to Anki** (I didn't take notes—just highlighted and read, then made flashcards)
- Over the next ~3 weeks I ended up going through almost every chapter in the Kaplan Gen Chem book, taking notes on a chapter if I felt especially weak on it, and then adding all formulas and key definitions to Anki

- I also began learning the organ systems and learning biology material that wasn't covered in MCDB 1150
- **I worked through all my Anki reviews (almost) every single day.** This was probably the single most important thing I did, because there's nothing worse than not being able to remember a formula for a topic that you completely understand on test day.
- **By the end of my studying, I was almost exclusively working through the AAMC materials** with only a small amount of content review. I did constantly have the feeling that I should have done more content review/worked through things faster/done more... I think a lot of people on the shortened timeline feel that way
- A few weeks out from test day, I worked through **2-3 CARS passages each day** from the official AAMC materials → very helpful in gaining a good rhythm with passages

Topics I never studied or hardly studied during content review:

- Genetics (as long as you're solid on class material, the genetics will be easy)
- Biochemistry (same as above, but I would refresh my amino acids every few weeks and right before the exam and had some flashcards on more memory-heavy topics like enzyme kinetics or glycolysis)
- Organic chemistry (I studied lab methods pretty heavily, but I never really made it through much OChem during MCAT prep. If I'd had more time I would have, but I kept doing alright without it. I do wish I'd really hammered home functional group names and names of different types of reactions)
- Physics (same as above, the physics on the MCAT was pretty basic compared to class. I just made sure I had formulas completely memorized)

Resources I Used:

- The **AAMC official materials**—every single thing the AAMC offers is very valuable, not just the practice tests!
- **Kaplan Quick Sheets**—I spent a day entering all of the mnemonics and formulas on the quick sheets to Anki, and I wish I'd done this week 1 or 2
- **Khan Academy videos for the organ systems**—watched them on 2x speed, took visual notes, then entered right to Anki. I spent a ton of time going over organ system videos, which was necessary because there are a lot of questions on them, but the time investment I put in was definitely not proportional to the amount of points it yielded.
- **Princeton Review Psych/Soc book**—right level of depth, and my score jumped 3 points on psych/soc after reading it and working through flashcards
- The **300 page psych/soc outline on Reddit**—when I kept having new terms come up on practice tests even after reading the Princeton Review book, I went through this document as a more comprehensive set of terms and added all new terms to Anki.
- My **physics cheat sheets** from throughout the post-bacc program—just entered all common formulas to Anki.
- The **mnemonics** in the margins of the Kaplan books, especially for biology. Many of them came in handy on test day!
- **Reddit**—every time I didn't understand a problem explanation from AAMC full lengths, I would be able to find a WAY better explanation here.

What I Wish I'd Done Differently:

- **Started working through the vast quantity of AAMC materials earlier.** I underestimated how much there is and didn't get started on the non-full length materials until I was a few weeks out from test day.
- Purchased a **UWorld subscription**. I've heard the UWorld questions are the most similar to the AAMC questions
- I took 2 third party practice tests and I found them pretty unhelpful. I scored 6-7 points lower on these exams and the questions weren't super indicative of the actual content. I think those 4 days I spent on them would have been better used for more content review or official AAMC practice questions. But everyone is different and if you're struggling with stamina more than content, then I would recommend doing third party tests.
- **Reviewed my full lengths more efficiently.** I would sometimes start reviewing them in the afternoon after finishing the full length, but other times it would take the full next day to go over it. Then with taking a day off each week, I would be down to only 4 days of actual studying and would get stressed that I wasn't doing "enough."