

MCAT PREP ADVICE FROM PAST CE PRE-HEALTH STUDENTS

The advice contained in this document is a compilation of suggestions from dozens of post-bacc students who have taken the MCAT and generously have shared their hard-won insights and advice.

The first part contains an actionable summary of their advice, the second part contains more detail in quotes directly from the students themselves.

You know yourself best and should develop an individualized approach that suits your learning style and timeline. We hope that the following suggestions will point you in the right direction. We wish you all the best with your MCAT prep!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| PART I: SUMMARIZED ADVICE | 2 |
| 1. REGISTER FOR THE MCAT EARLY | 2 |
| 2. CREATE YOUR STUDY PLAN..... | 2 |
| 3. STUDY MATERIALS (RECOMMENDED AND OTHERWISE) | 6 |
| 4. TEST DAY | 8 |
| PART II: QUOTES DIRECTLY FROM STUDENTS | 9 |
| 1. ADVICE ON MANAGING YOUR MCAT PREP TIME | 9 |
| 2. ADVICE ON FULL-LENGTH PRACTICE TESTS | 9 |
| 3. ADVICE ON CONTENT REVIEW AND PRACTICE PROBLEMS..... | 11 |
| 4. SECTION-SPECIFIC ADVICE | 12 |
| <i>A. Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems.....</i> | <i>12</i> |
| <i>B. Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills (CARS).....</i> | <i>13</i> |
| <i>C. Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems.....</i> | <i>14</i> |
| <i>D. Psychology and Sociology.....</i> | <i>15</i> |
| 5. TEST DAY ADVICE | 16 |
| 6. MISCELLANEOUS ADVICE & WELL WISHES..... | 17 |
| 7. BIG-PICTURE ADVICE FROM HIGH-SCORING STUDENTS..... | 19 |
| <i>Student A: My Comprehensive Study Plan in 3 steps (MCAT SCORE: 522)</i> | <i>19</i> |
| <i>Student B: A few last Words to the Wise (MCAT score: 521)</i> | <i>20</i> |

PART I: SUMMARIZED ADVICE

1. REGISTER FOR THE MCAT EARLY

1. [Register on the AAMC website](#) early to ensure you get the test date and location you want.
 - a. MCAT registration opens early October for Jan-Jun test dates and early Feb for Jul-Sep.
2. Plan to take the MCAT by June 30 the year you apply.
3. Apply for fee assistance before registering for the MCAT, as benefits are not retroactive.
 - a. The fee assistance program provides students with total family income $\leq 400\%$ of the poverty level reduced registration fee and access to all online MCAT Official Prep products. [Learn more about benefits and eligibility requirements](#).

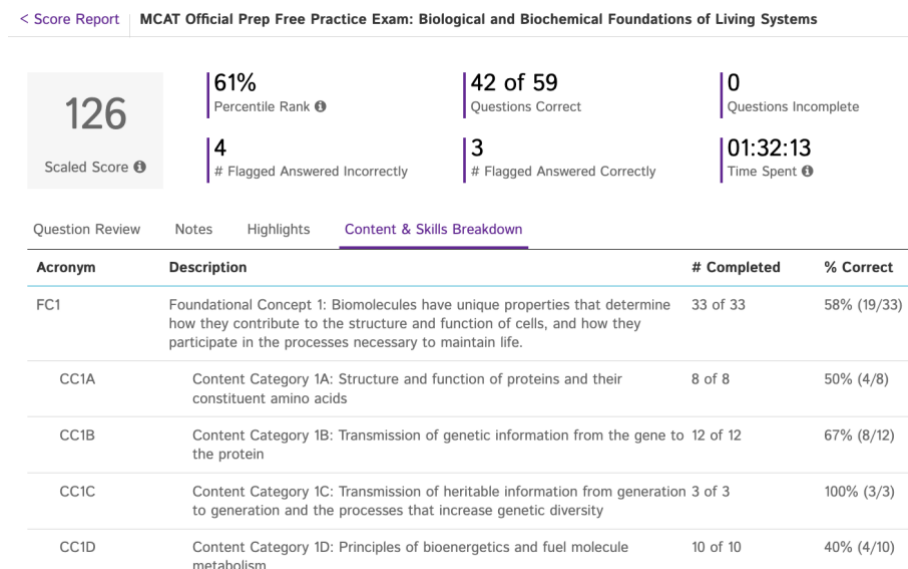
2. CREATE YOUR STUDY PLAN

1. **Keep in mind your high-level goals for MCAT studying**
 - **Material** – Identify what you don't know already so that you can learn it. Refresh what you know so that you can get those questions easily
 - **Format** – become comfortable with the format and timing of the test so that you can ace the info you know. Here's a snapshot:

| MCAT Section | Number of Questions | Time Allowed | Subjects Tested | Score Range |
|---|---|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems | 59 total (10 passages, 44 passage-based questions, 15 discrete questions) | 95 minutes | Biochemistry (25%), Biology (5%), General Chemistry (30%), Organic Chemistry (15%), Physics (25%) | 118-132 |
| Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills (CARS) | 53 total (9 passages) | 90 minutes | Foundations of Comprehension (30%), Reasoning Within the Text (30%), Reasoning Beyond the Text (40%) | 118-132 |
| Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems | 59 total (10 passages, 44 passage-based questions, 15 discrete questions) | 95 minutes | Biochemistry (25%), Biology (65%), General Chemistry (5%), Organic Chemistry (5%) | 118-132 |
| Psychological, Social, and Biological Foundations of Behavior | 59 total (10 passages, 44 passage-based questions, 15 discrete questions) | 95 minutes | Biology (5%), Psychology (65%), Sociology (30%) | 118-132 |
| Exam Total: 4 Sections | Exam Total: 230 questions | Exam Total: 6 hours and 15 minutes of testing time; approximately 7 hours and 30 minutes of seated time with breaks. | | Total Score Range: 472-528 |

2. Take the free full-length AAMC MCAT Official Prep Free Practice Exam (scored) to determine where to focus your study efforts

- Do this once you have completed all or most of the coursework tested on the MCAT
- Take this under testing conditions.
 - Start at 8:00 AM (when the real exam starts), only have water/snacks during scheduled test breaks, leave your phone silenced in another room until the exam is over.
- Review your score report
 - Use your AAMC learning goal performance to determine where you did well/poorly - click on each of the 4 broad sections in your score report, then go to “Content and skills breakdown” for a detailed report of your performance relative to AAMC learning objectives. (Screenshot below)
 - Where you did poorly - plan to focus on these areas using section-specific question banks and detailed content review.
 - Where you did well - still plan to dedicate 20% of your studying time to ensure you crush these questions but reserve the rest of the time for what you don’t already know.



- **Important: Don’t let the score from this test bruise your ego! It will likely be much lower than your goal for the exam.**

3. Create an MCAT Study Schedule/Plan

- Allocate 250-400h to MCAT studying
 - Distribute your time across full-length practice tests, section-specific question banks, and content review. See below for details on each.
 - If you completed all of the relevant courses in the past year, plan to spend at least 250 hours on dedicated MCAT prep after completing your coursework. If you completed some of the relevant courses several years ago, plan to put in closer to 400 hours.
 - Examples
 - Fast Track: 8h/day, 5d/week for 7 weeks = 280h
 - Important note for Fast Track people: Six months before your intended test date, complete an entire **CARS** section. If you find that you are running out of time, be disciplined about completing ~2 timed CARS passages per week, every week, until your test date.
 - Long Track: 3h/session MWF, 8h Sat for 16 weeks = 272h
- Full length AAMC practice tests
 - Students who have earned competitive scores on the MCAT most commonly report completing 6 to 8 practice tests prior to taking the MCAT.
 - Complete at least three of these tests in a full-length, timed format.
 - Some people find it useful to complete all of their practice tests in a full-length format. Others find it useful to take a few in a full-length format and to tackle the rest in smaller chunks. Either way, it is essential to carefully review each test – see below for tips.
 - Tips for creating test-like conditions for your practice tests:
 - Ideally, use an erasable notepad like the one on the real MCAT. If you don't have one, use scratch paper.
 - Start at 8:00 AM (when the real exam starts), only have water/snacks during scheduled test breaks, leave your phone silenced in another room until the exam is over.
 - Reviewing each practice test is as important as taking it!
 - Review **all** of the problems to make sure you can get them right next time or are getting them right for the right reason.
 - It takes 8-16h to properly review a full-length test, but this is a GOLD MINE!
 - We recommend AAMC practice tests because they best reflect the actual content, layout, and voice of the MCAT. We do not recommend third party practice tests.
 - The “Advice on Full-Length Practice Tests” section in this document is chock-full of great advice on this topic!
- Section-specific question banks
 - Focus on areas you did not ace in the practice test.
 - We recommend completing practice questions in chunks of 10-40 at once, under the same time constraints as the test (~96s/question)
- Content review (see next page)

- Content review
 - Focused review of areas of weakness on practice test. Briefly review areas where you did well.
 - Read MCAT prep book, watch Khan academy
 - Use **intense study sessions** to make your content review useful

| | | | |
|---|-------------------------|-----------|--|
| 1 | Set a Goal | 1-2 min | Decide what you want to accomplish in your study session |
| 2 | Study with Focus | 30-50 min | Interact with material - organize, summarize, process, re-read, fill-in notes - concept mapping - unifying concept - homework - treat like a test |
| 3 | Reward Yourself | 10-15 min | Take a break - call a friend, play a short game, get a snack |
| 4 | Review | 5 min | Go over what you just studied |

4. Additional resources for creating a study plan

- If you purchase a set of MCAT prep books, they likely will come with access to sample study plans.
- The AAMC provides this free guide [How to Create a Study Plan for the MCAT Exam](#)

5. **Changing your plan is OKAY!** If/when you realize the plan you've created isn't working for you, adapt it. Don't stick to a plan that's not working for you just because someone else said it should work. Be adaptable and trust yourself.

3. STUDY MATERIALS (RECOMMENDED AND OTHERWISE)

RECOMMENDED MATERIALS

1. **Purchase the [AAMC MCAT Official Prep Complete Bundle](#)**, which includes all of the AAMC practice tests and question banks.
 - Since these passages are from the AAMC, they are most similar to what you will see on your test day
 - Try not to be discouraged by scores and percentiles. Many people may re-take these questions, as well as answer them using note and resources, which can skew the numbers
 - Many people's test day MCAT score falls within a few points of their AAMC full-length practice tests

2. **Purchase one complete set of MCAT subject review books.**

Most commonly recommended:

- *Examkrackers*
- *Kaplan*
- *The Princeton Review*

A note about non-AAMC material: Some third-party materials do better on certain topics than others. Working your way through the entirety of the official AAMC materials can help you make sure that you are not missing any important topics or content. Additionally, third-party full-length exams can give you scores that are quite different than what you will receive on test day. Utilizing these resources to gain knowledge and experience can be extremely useful; just remember to take these scores and percentages with a grain of salt.

3. **Purchase an [Erased MCAT Notepad](#)**

Use this when doing practice tests and practice problems to mimic test day. Note: on test day you will not actually be allowed to erase anything.

4. **Khan Academy's MCAT tutorials**

This free resource offers reliable videos for content review as well as AAMC-written practice problems.

- Note: When you go to the Khan Academy MCAT [landing page](#), the four sections at the top will take you to question banks. To find the sections that provide videos for content review, scroll down on the page, past the first four sections.

5. **Recommended resources for CARS prep from an experienced pre-health advisor, Dr.**

Doyen Rainey at UT-Dallas, who has taught CARS prep courses to his students for many years:

"AAMC's CARS diagnostic tool is an excellent value at ~\$25 and is accessible online, but it has only about 3 tests worth of practice questions. In my experience, that's only enough practice for someone who's already reasonably good at CARS. For a student looking for lots of CARS practice, I recommend the NextStep "108 CARS Passages" (~\$30 on Amazon) and ExamKrackers "101 Passages" (~\$50 on amazon)."

6. If you have exhausted the AAMC practice tests and question banks, we recommend:
- **Practice Tests**
 - After the AAMC practice tests, we recommend **BluePrint (formerly NextStep Test Prep) full-length tests**
 - **Practice problems** (if desired):
 - UWorld MCAT Question Bank
 - Some students find the difficulty of the UWorld questions to be harder than those provided by the AAMC, but practicing with difficult passages can be beneficial. Additionally, UWorld is well known for their answers and explanations. They are detailed, easy to follow, and always accompanied by clear photos and diagrams. Many students use UWorld for both content review and passage practice!
 - “I bought a subscription to this and 100% recommend it. I found the questions to be representative of AAMC material and the answers they give are superb. UWorld offered some of the best content review for me.”
 - Varsity Tutor’s *MCAT Prep* app
 - Jack Westin’s *Daily CARS Question of the Day*
7. AAMC publishes the following free exhaustive documents that you may find helpful if you have specific question:
- a. [MCAT Essentials](#) - provides key logistical information about registering for the MCAT and what to expect on testing day.
 - b. [What’s on the MCAT Exam](#) – available as an interactive web page or as a PDF. Covers, you guessed it, what’s on the MCAT exam

NOT RECOMMENDED

- **User-Generated Online Resources**

“Beware of any resources you find online (Reddit, StudentDoctor, etc.) There is a wealth of misinformation floating through cyberspace.”
- **ReadyMCAT (Princeton Review’s mobile app)**

“The app uses flash cards that are poorly coded and are not relevant to the questions that follow.”
- **Gold Standard**

“Their questions are needlessly difficult to understand and their explanations are very poor.”
(continued on next page)
- **Kaplan Full-Length Practice Tests**

“I do not recommend the Kaplan full-length practice tests. They were frustratingly difficult and nothing like the AAMC practice tests. I scored a 503 on both Kaplan practice tests that I took but ranged 508-514 on the AAMC practice tests, which was more representative of my actual score.”
- **Kaplan QBank**

“Almost useless. Although this is advertised as being highly interactive, most of the material seemed pretty standard. I found that the answers mimicked what was already in the textbook.”

4. TEST DAY

You are intelligent and capable enough to succeed. Center your mind so that you can do your best.

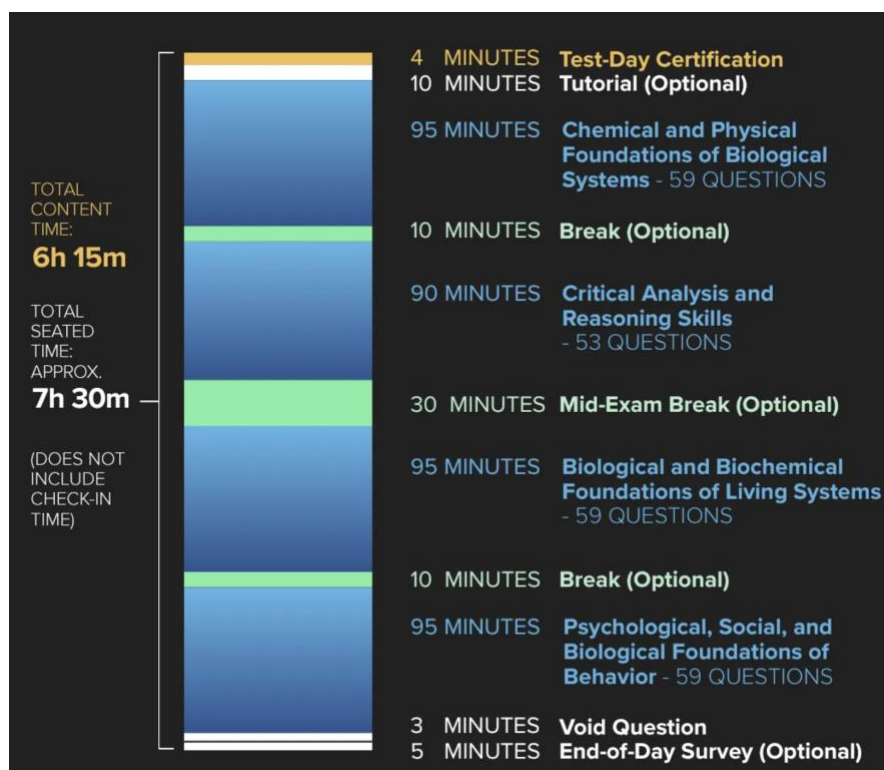
The day before:

1. Prep your food (lunch and snacks for shorter breaks) and layers.
2. Drive to the testing center and find the testing room if this will help minimize day-of anxiety.

The day of:

1. Get to the testing center 30m before your test start time.
2. You will be able to store your lunch and other belongings in a locker. You may only bring your ID and eyeglasses into the testing room (water is not allowed in the testing room).
3. You will be provided with an erasable notepad with nine 14x8.5 in pages, a fine-point marker, earplugs.

Exam Day Schedule (image credit: Blueprint Test Prep)



PART II: QUOTES DIRECTLY FROM STUDENTS

1. ADVICE ON MANAGING YOUR MCAT PREP TIME

“Know that you absolutely will need 300+ hours to be successful. Do not overlook topics that you think you already know. Review EVERYTHING!!! Be diligent and make a study plan that you will follow!”

“A flexible schedule is vital. You need a schedule to keep you on track, but it needs to be flexible, because life happens and creating unrealistic rigidity can cause stress to the point of inaction when your schedule gets off track. I set ‘suggested’ daily goals for myself, but these were flexible for when I had other things come up, or if a chapter was very difficult and took me longer than expected to get through. I also set ‘rigid’ weekly goals to keep myself on track and was diligent about always meeting these. This system personally worked very well for me.”

“Most of your science prep comes from your prerequisite courses. The time to learn it is then: strive for comprehension. If you are only taking biology, chemistry, and physics now, you’ll have to teach yourself the psychology/sociology content, as well as human physiology. For those sections, start early (ideally, over winter break if you’ll be taking the MCAT in the summer) to build up a base before you hit MCAT prep hard later on.”

“Knowing what I know now, here is my advice to pre-meds who are currently taking their science prerequisites: Be sure to reference an outline of the concepts tested on the MCAT while you are taking the relevant courses. As you go, create 1-sheet summaries of the content from each course that matches to the content on the MCAT. As it was, I ended up going back to class materials and doing just that, but it would have been more time-efficient to do it while I was actually taking the classes.”

“Make sure that you include enough time for practice questions when laying out your study plan. There is a lot of content to know, which can be overwhelming. But, knowing how to apply the content you learn is of equal importance. Additionally, it is essentially guaranteed that on test day you will come across material that you do not know or understand. Knowing how to interpret a passage and form conclusions from the material presented to you is a large part of being successful. This skill comes from doing many,

2. ADVICE ON FULL-LENGTH PRACTICE TESTS

“Take as many practice tests as you can. I took 6, but wished I’d taken 10.”

“Assess your progress by taking full-length exams. And by that, I mean the full 8 hours, not partial sections. Fatigue and loss of stamina are very real, as are the need for good time management and test-taking strategies. Train like you fight, as they say in the Army.”

“After a practice exam, take the day off. Do not study, do not review. Give yourself a break. The day after that, do a solid review of the exam, which will take as long (or longer) than you spent on the practice test (8+ hours).”

“After each practice exam, go through every single question carefully. **In addition to understanding why the right answers are right, be sure you fully understand why every single wrong-answer choice is wrong.** If you encounter a concept that is new to you, even if only it only showed up in the context of an answer choice that was incorrect, be sure to teach yourself about that concept. In fact, a couple of the concepts that showed up on my real MCAT were ones that I had only encountered in the context of wrong-answer choices on practice problems and practice exams.”

“After every practice exam, **record your mistakes/misunderstandings in an ‘Error Journal’ or something similar.** I recorded the types of problems I got wrong & why, including reference to **which** problem on which practice exam so I could return to it if necessary. I categorized my errors by section and topic, but you can organize it however makes sense to you. By doing this, you will notice patterns that can give excellent insight into your weaknesses & where you should devote additional review time. This was so incredibly effective for me that I will continue doing this into medical school.”

“As I went back through my practice tests and section bank/question packs, I made Anki notecards for questions I missed. That way, I never got that same question wrong again.”

“Be sure to take ALL of the official AAMC practice exams. Other practice exams were helpful, but the AAMC ones were identical to the real MCAT. It is essential to make yourself take several full-length exams using the same timing as the real test to build up your endurance and pacing for the real test.”

“Do not get discouraged. The practice tests are never the same, so you will always be seeing new, possibly unfamiliar information. That is by design. It doesn’t do any good to take an exam on the same topics. Stay confident, you will know this stuff, despite how a few practice exams go.”

“The full-length NextStep and Princeton Review exams felt more difficult than the real MCAT. It was good in that it helped you with a worst-case-scenario-type deal. It was bad in that it makes you think you’re going to do terribly, even if that’s not true.” (Note: This comment was submitted by a person who earned a 519 score on the real MCAT.)

“Make sure you take third-party party exams with the right mindset. CARS especially is *extremely* difficult for 3rd party exams to replicate. High or low, be wary if your CARS score on any 3rd party test material doesn’t track to your AAMC material average. It got to the point where I would swap in AAMC CARS passages from their section banks for the NextStep CARS sections when I was taking a practice exam. Having tried NextStep and Kaplan exams (in addition to AAMC), I found NextStep to be the closest approximation on the remaining subjects. Note though, they’re more challenging than the AAMC exams. Also, there seems to be a tendency of NextStep to be less predictive the further away you get from ~505 and for many people to top out around 510. Don’t get discouraged by this! Review your tests and take those learnings to the AAMC exams where it really counts!”

3. ADVICE ON CONTENT REVIEW AND PRACTICE PROBLEMS

“Make an effort to understand not only the material tested but the test itself. The MCAT is not strictly a content-based test. Early on, get familiar with the format of its passages and questions.”

“The MCAT covers a vast amount of material, but generally to a lesser depth than you may have learned it in classes. Skimming through the AAMC MCAT Guide may be helpful to see what percentage of different concepts might be on the test and therefore what is ‘high yield.’”

“I made notecards and then exchanged them with a friend. I found I enjoyed looking over hers more because I didn’t know what would be on the other side, so I genuinely had to rely on my recall of the topic.”

“I re-did the AAMC section banks over and over until I got 100%. That approach really helped me understand HOW to think about the questions.”

“Content review is necessary, but you also must do a LOT of practice problems! The MCAT tests your understanding of the MCAT as much as it tests your understanding of science. Practice questions not only improve your understanding of how the test works, but also allow you to identify the content areas that need the most review. The best practice problems are those in the AAMC question banks.”

“I found that the passages on actual test day felt most similar to the AAMC Section Bank practice problems (which tend to be a higher level of difficulty), particularly for the science sections. I think the perceived difficulty for each person differs for a given test, and I would imagine the actual difficulty of the test varies from test-date to test-date (it all nets out in the end with scaled scoring), but my experience was that the actual test felt about a degree of magnitude more difficult than any of the full-length practice tests.”

“My Kaplan books were great for content review, but you must do a lot of practice problems and not just read. Do not fall into the trap of obsessing over small details; aim for general understanding of the topics that come up recurrently on practice tests (amino acid chemistry, fluid dynamics etc.).”

“Practice, practice, practice. But really just don’t get discouraged. I had been fearing taking the MCAT since I first thought about med school in high school. It isn’t a fun experience, but if you have done well in your pre-med courses, you have the tools and will do well.”

“I had high hopes about preparing for the MCAT while completing my prerequisite courses. As it turned out, I was slightly disappointed in myself for not studying as much as I planned. Looking back, however, I think that ultimately focusing on the classes that I was taking was actually the best approach, as it allowed me to deeply learn the material.”

“Do one science passage per week throughout the fall and spring semesters. I wish I had maintained my Gen Chem and Physics knowledge throughout the year. It seemed overwhelming to add MCAT prep on top of my coursework, but one science passage a week would have been doable.”

“I used a Kaplan prep course and liked it—it was the right resource for me personally, since it kept me on pace and focused on the larger, more important topics. It was expensive but I felt that it was more important for me to do well the first time around and not have to re-take it at a later date.”

“It is important to not get too bogged down by the detail provided by certain test prep resources (ExamCrackers, Khan Academy).”

“By learning the tools available to you (most valuably, the review function), you can learn to move through the exam very efficiently.”

“Depending on how long it’s been since you’ve taken classes, I’d recommend doing close to a 60/40 split between content review and practice questions. You can’t do enough questions. They’ll train you on reading charts and graphs and data interpretation (a HUGE portion of the BB and C/P sections), passage wording, and general timing of reading. Do as many passages as you possible can, and definitely complete all the AAMC and UWorld material.”

“If you are wanting to start studying early for the MCAT (before any dedicated study time), start with something that you will not be learning in class. The most common example is the P/S section. This material is not too difficult conceptually, but is information that is important to know. Learning this information early will give you more time later on to practice its application with practice problems and passages. The only caveat is to make sure that you are keeping up with the information you learned – whether it be through reviewing notecards, re-watching videos, or looking over your notes.”

4. SECTION-SPECIFIC ADVICE

A. CHEMICAL AND PHYSICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BIOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

“The best advice I have for this section is to not let the passages intimidate you! This is the first section on the exam, and the AAMC will purposely try to scare you out of the gates at every turn with terms, units, concepts, and dense passages filled with useless information. Practice is your best friend here to build confidence. Also, make sure you are very comfortable with physics, chemistry, and biochemistry concepts, because only a handful of questions will involve actual calculations. I recommend watching Khan Academy videos and doing textbook questions on your own for any concepts or physics/gen chem equations you don’t think you grasp well conceptually.”

Several students provided the same tip as this student: “My strategy for this section was to flag and leave most of the calculation questions for the end. I learned this the hard way, after running out of time on a practice test because I spent too much time trying to remember some equations to use or how to rearrange them under pressure.”

“There are a bunch of formulas that you must memorize in preparation for the test. I found a comprehensive list online that provided all the formulas needed for the MCAT; definitely look for that list.”

“For the calculations, if you are like me and aren’t the most intuitive math person (or it’s just been a while since you’ve done math without a calculator), there are a ton of great videos on YouTube about how to estimate, work with exponents and fractions, etc. without a calculator. I had to spend a lot of time practicing this, personally. The calculation questions should be a piece of cake if your skills are up to par and you can remember the equations.”

“Being able to do mental math is necessary to have enough time in the C/P section. Be meticulous about asking HOW MANY things the question is asking about (i.e. one electron or two?).”

“If you haven’t taken a biostatistics/statistics course recently (or ever), spend some time on YouTube. Familiarize yourself with scatterplots, stem-leaf plots, boxplots, normal distributions, etc. Really, I recommend getting to the point where interpreting data is intuitive. You will save yourself SO much time on the C/P & B/B sections.”

“I found that the Kaplan books were very helpful in prioritizing information. For example, I briefly went over the anatomy of the intestines/gut, but this was rated a very low priority on Kaplan, which was helpful. (There may be one standalone question that asks about this, but it is necessary to prioritize.)”

“You may know the material, but it will often be presented to you in a format that looks unfamiliar. There will be a great deal of graphical interpretation, so you will need to rely on your ability to think critically to solve these problems. You cannot get away with regurgitating information if you want to be successful on the MCAT.”

“Biggest piece of advice here is to know your units! Oftentimes, if you know what a unit is composed of (Newtons = $\text{kg} \cdot \text{m/s}^2$), you can often intuit what you need to do with the provided information to get the right answer.”

“Many answers can simply be found by looking at and interpreting the graph. Don’t get overwhelmed and caught up in all of the details presented to you in the passage. Many of them are not necessary in order to answer the questions correctly.”

B. CRITICAL ANALYSIS AND REASONING SKILLS (CARS)

“I think people make a lot of mistakes with strategy on CARS. I NEVER highlighted. I tried it once, and it completely screwed me up. My method is, first, to read through the whole passage once without losing focus. During that read, I make a mental note of which paragraphs I understood well and which ones I didn’t. Then, I just start answering the questions. If a question will use information from a paragraph I thought I didn’t understand that well, I’d read it again, then answer the question. If you must highlight, do it as sparingly as possible. I also flag a ton of questions and go back on a second pass, if I have time, to make sure I didn’t get myself into a logic trap.”

“CARS is a QUESTION-reading comprehension test as much as it is a PASSAGE-reading comprehension test. In other words, I found that understanding what the question was asking was more or just as important as understanding the actual passage. Pay attention to this when you review your practice tests and understand each question you got wrong as well as the ones you got right. Also pay attention to the question codes the AAMC provides for each type of question during your review. This helped me to categorize the questions in my head going forward.”

“The CARS section tests your reading comprehension of dense passages. Get familiar with the types of reasoning that is commonly needed to respond to CARS questions. With lots of practice, you will develop your own strategy for tackling tough passages during a timed test.”

“CARS prep is something that should be being done regularly outside of class, through reading of other material. If you don’t already do a lot of outside reading, I’d start chowing down on tough material in advance (*Origin of the Species*; magazine issues of *The Economist*, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, etc.), and also read scientific abstracts and make sure you get used to how to comprehend the

dense information in them. I know some classmates who were doing poorly on CARS passages at first on their practice tests, but they got better by hitting practice questions over and over.”

“The hardest part about CARS was how much internal debate I had around how the questions were written or what the text was telling me. I used a lot of Princeton Review passages to prepare for the CARS section and I felt more confident as time went on. For me, a lot of the work revolved around not ‘arguing’ with the passage.

“It is all about time. Learn to read quickly and try not to let yourself get hung up on specific questions or passages. If you manage to complete the section in its entirety, you’ll be better off than most test-takers.”

“Be very aware of linguistic polarity (is the statement positive or negative?). The simple presence or absence of the word ‘not’ can invalidate some of the answers to a question.”

“ExamCrackers offers good strategy suggestions for CARS.”

“Force yourself to smile during CARS! Pretend everything is the most interesting thing that you’ve ever read, and you’ll fool yourself into believing it.”

“I found it helpful to highlight the names that were presented within the passage. If a question would later ask about a certain person’s opinion, it would take me less time to find where that individual was mentioned. This very helpful in passages that are comparing several different opinions.”

C. BIOLOGICAL AND BIOCHEMICAL FOUNDATIONS OF LIVING SYSTEMS

“Here is an important tip: A lot of science questions aren’t really science; they’re CARS questions disguised as science. A person with good reading comprehension but no background in science could get this type of question right by reading the answers carefully. Remember that if you run into any questions where you don’t remember the content.”

“Amino acids are very high yield; I strongly suggest making flash cards and flipping through them when you don’t have enough energy for a serious study session. I recommend the following link: <https://www.sporcle.com/games/sproutcm/amino-acids-from-structures>”

“Biological sciences needs studying supplementary to the MCDB 1150 and 2150 sequence. You’ll need to learn human physiology on your own. Focus on the kidneys, heart, brain, eyes, ears, and lungs. Do not let yourself get overwhelmed by the scope of the exam. A few days of self-study beyond the concepts covered in the MCDB sequence will get you where you need to be.”

“Repeat this like a mantra: kinases phosphorylate and phosphatases dephosphorylate!!! 😊”

D. PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

“This section involves reading excerpts from sociology and psychology papers to come to a conclusion. There is a significant amount of subject-specific vocabulary that you must learn.”

“I spent a significant amount of time studying for Psychology and Sociology. I made hundreds of notecards as most of the material was simply rote memorization of very specific terminology. Psych/Soc seemed to be one of the easiest sections to focus on for a score increase, as the material wasn’t complex or difficult to understand; it just took time.”

“I used Khan Academy exclusively to prepare for Psychology/Sociology. This section was the most straightforward; there wasn’t as much logical deduction. In fact, many of the questions were basically just identification. (Do you remember what stereotype threat is? How about the foot-in-the-door principle?)”

“Even though I was anthropology major, I found this section to be the most challenging to master. The content is just so picky and detailed! It was consistently the lowest section on all of my practice tests, but I was able to pull a 132 on the real thing, largely thanks to running flashcards for hours and hours. Hard work and memorization pays off for this one. A lot of people online say the Kaplan books are weak for this section, but the Khan academy (and the “Khan Academy Notes” 300-page document on Reddit) is strong.”

“Everything you need to know about PSYC/SOCY can be found on the AMCAS subject list and in the ExamCrackers books. You will absolutely be able to score in the upper percentiles if you just follow those sources.”

“The Kaplan book covered the Psychology/Sociology section well. It offered some helpful strategies to identify common ‘wrong answer pathologies.’”

“I found that studying Psych/Soc after an 8 or 10 hour workday was very helpful because this is the last section of the exam, so I found it helpful to practice when I was really feeling tired. That prepared me to not be tired when I got to the last section of the MCAT.”

5. TEST DAY ADVICE

“Bring snacks, layers, a thermos if you like tea or coffee, and remember to breathe deeply and do your best to center yourself. You will not be able to take anything with you into the exam room. They will give you a locker for your stuff, and you will need to empty pockets and sign into and out of the room every time. (Do not decide super-hydrate on test day, or else you will spend a lot of time checking out and in whenever you have to go to the bathroom.) You may start your actual exam after your start time due to check in times; that’s okay. You will feel nervous; that is normal. Just focus on staying centered.”

“When you are sitting there on exam day, staring at the computer screen, **force yourself to smile**. Notice if your shoulders are trying to paste themselves to your ears. Take 5 seconds, close your eyes and breathe deeply. This is all just an elaborate game my friends! **All of you are intelligent and capable enough to succeed**, this is just the game we have to play to advance. So, play it beautifully!”

“Be confident! Confidence is the lubrication that allows all of that great post-bacc science knowledge to be released. And try to relax; unfortunately, I only got 2 hours of sleep before I took the MCAT because I was nervous, but this may have been a blessing—I went in with low expectations, which allowed me to feel calm.”

“Do NOT share your practice exam scores (or your test-day score!) with any other pre-meds—and stay off Reddit! Don’t get too down on yourself when you inevitably get a practice exam score you don’t love—just take the rest of the day off, and start targeting the next day!”

“It is a stressful test, and will feel gross—it is designed to feel like that. Take a deep breath and don’t forget to like yourself. After two weeks of almost non-stop studying, my scores started to drop because I was miserable. I took my last week off from practice tests and loosened my iron grip on reviewing and found that when I was happier I did way better. Smile through the test, and remember it isn’t everything.”

“During the test, right before every section, I would write myself a little inspirational message to get psyched. I would try and trick myself into being excited: ‘Oh boy! This is my favorite section!’ Even when it was sarcastic and it felt cheesy and silly, it definitely helped center me during the test.”

“A lot of people say to rest and veg out the day before the test. I didn’t do this. I pretty much ran Anki flash cards that entire day, which I think paid off. I think it’s a bad idea to watch Netflix or a movie the day before the test. Research has shown that the more unrelated information you intake in between encoding and testing, the less you’ll be able to recall. Try testing this for yourself before the practice tests if you don’t believe me. If anything, exercise is probably the best thing to do on this day so you can sleep well. Avoid social media and distractions at all costs! One more thing: Unlike midterms and even finals during undergrad, it’s impossible to mentally run through all of the material in your head leading up to the test, so you’ll likely feel unsure about how prepared you are. I think this is normal. Trust your preparation and you’ll be just fine!”

“In retrospect, I think I probably went a little bit too hard during the last week of prep, to the point where I think I was pretty burnt out by the time exam day came around. Depending on who you are, and whether or not you are OK with pushing preparation right up until the very days and hours before a big exam,

presentation, etc., I would highly recommend tapering off in the week leading up to the exam. Trust in your preparation and give yourself the gift of extra rest in the last few days before the test so that you are feeling refreshed and ready to go on the actual test day.”

[For students in the cohort-based post-bacc program:] “I really would stress the importance of NOT working between the end of the program and taking the exam. Just focus on test prep until you take the test at the end of June.”

6. MISCELLANEOUS ADVICE & WELL WISHES

“Make sure you work out regularly, even if it's just a walk at the end of the way. Remember that some of those around you are not preparing for the MCAT. It's up to you to set boundaries in your personal life, and make time for your loved ones when possible.”

“I wish I had started MCAT prep earlier (easier said than done). I also would have paid more attention to my health; a lot of people (including me) sacrificed their health to study. I ended up getting very sick a couple of weeks before the MCAT, and I was mostly out of commission for 5 days. That was a disaster for my rhythm and probably cost me a point or two on the exam. I would have taken more time to relax if I could do it again.”

“What made the biggest difference for me: You have to have your life together! You can't focus and study if your life is imploding, and you can't do this on your own. You need support along with feedback, study time, and advice from your peers.”

“Although it's ideal to take the MCAT just once and to get a good score and move on, I took the real MCAT twice. I took it the first time in the summer immediately after my post-bacc year when I was stressed and had only a month to prep (I got a 509), and then again after six months of part-time preparation (I got a 520). I found that the extra time allowed me to learn the ins and outs of the test.”

“Like any standardized test, this is a standardized test. IT DOES NOT MEASURE YOUR WORTH.”

“Within each section, I'd recommend scrolling through the menu and answering discrete questions first, then returning to those that are passage-based. Further, if you don't know an answer, GUESS AND MOVE ON! On test day, I encountered multiple ambiguous, noggin-scratching questions that were followed by an enchainment of easy ones. If you can't accept the resign-guess-move on approach, you'll lose a lot of time (and thereby points that you deserve!). Also, if you can, try to appreciate your MCAT prep for what it is ... a chance to integrate and connect all you've learned and to apply it toward medically themed situations!”

“The entire test can be boiled down to your ability to read fast and rapidly interpret charts and graphs. Practice speed reading throughout your exam prep. If you can get to the point where you have 15-20 minutes to review each science section and double that to review the CARS and P/S sections, you'll be golden. The more time you have to go back and review answers / passages without the time crunch of completion, the more you'll re-read and find potential mistakes. Do not underestimate this. It can be

tempting to just focus on pure content memorization, but outside of P/S and the amino acids, most answers can be determined right out of the passage or with some critical analysis / thinking skills.”

“I hired a tutor specifically for my areas of weakness (chemistry/physics). This helped me improve my score significantly while saving the money I would have spent on a commercial MCAT prep course, when I could take care of the other topics myself.”

“I wish I would have stopped stressing myself out so early. I took a practice exam in September and again in January ... and ended up feeling like a complete failure. But once I started studying full-time in May, I realized my mistake: when I had taken those practice tests earlier, I hadn't learned any Biochemistry, Physics 2, or Physiology yet! Don't be hard on yourself.”

“A lot of my struggle with MCAT prep was trying to fit a mold. For the first week or two, I tried to follow the mechanics of studying for the MCAT as prescribed by my MCAT prep course: I did all the readings, did all the problems, and still felt horrible about my preparation. I wish I hadn't compared myself to others so much. I began feeling happier when I realized I need to study the way I found helpful. I used a white board a lot, color, diagrams, and videos. I explained a lot of concepts to my cat, and that helped me internalize concepts in an organic way. And I went back to my class notes a lot.”

“As cheesy as it sounds, try to have fun when taking the test. Remember that this exam is not life or death. It should not have any power of your self-worth. Success on a standardized exam does not reflect all of what makes you amazing, including your ability to be a fantastic doctor one day! Do your best and be proud of yourself!”

7. BIG-PICTURE ADVICE FROM HIGH-SCORING STUDENTS

STUDENT A: MY COMPREHENSIVE STUDY PLAN IN 3 STEPS (MCAT SCORE: 522)

The MCAT is a unique test. Content recall is not even close to the only thing you'll need to do well. Like the SAT, LSAT, and other similar entrance exams, the MCAT is a reasoning-based exam that tests your problem solving ability, performance under stress, and, most importantly, your dedication to a career as a physician. If you don't have a relentless desire to commit yourself to this path, then it's nearly impossible to do well. On the other hand, if you trust in yourself and your path that brought you here, I'm sure you'll find the motivation to soar over this hurdle. Good luck!!!

Step 1: Take an OFFICIAL AAMC (not third-party) practice test before you begin studying.

This can be hard to force yourself to do, but time and time again I've heard from other students about the importance of taking an official AAMC practice test (either the sample test or a full-length test, but not Official AAMC Practice Test #2) before beginning your formal review phase, to familiarize yourself with the exam format and to get an idea of where you stand with the content.

I think the trickiest part of the MCAT is getting a grasp on what the AAMC is looking for. This first step is crucial because it allows you to have a solid idea in your head of the AAMC's unique voice as you go through content review. You'll find that you can start to hear their voice and what type of questions they might ask, making the long and arduous content review phase much more fruitful. This is why I don't think it's nearly as useful to take a third party practice test, especially at this point. Importantly, don't let the score from this test bruise your ego! It will likely be much lower than your goal for the exam.

Step 2: Content review phase

This is the most laborious phase of MCAT preparation, in my opinion. Methods will vary from student to student. It is important to take your time and not rush through this! Even if you think you know a subject well, taking a systematic approach will ensure that you don't see content on the exam you aren't prepared for.

My systematic method was as follows:

- First, I took detailed notes from every page of my Kaplan content review books on blank printer paper, drawing in diagrams and graphs. (If I had an iPad Pro, I would have probably used that instead.) For me, the act of writing and drawing by hand is crucial for encoding information. Some students do fine with typed notes. I ended up with a stack of notes about 1.5 inches thick front and back, which took me about 1.5 months of working 6-8 hours/day, 3-5 days/week.
- At the end of this phase, I went through all of those notes, page-by-page, and created flashcards on my laptop using the free "AnkiApp," which syncs the cards to your smartphone. I think a good goal to have is to make sure to finish this phase at LEAST 1 month out from your exam date. I highly recommend making a calendar and sticking to it during this time. I took no practice tests during this phase. In addition to using my Kaplan books, for concepts I was sketchy on (especially in physics and psych/soc in my case), I watched Khan Academy videos, used the Khan Academy Notes documents (Google "Reddit Khan academy MCAT notes" for these), and read Wikipedia articles until I felt I had achieved a full understanding.

Step 3: Practice Test Phase

My goal was to take 7 practice tests (including the diagnostic sample test I took at the beginning) before my exam date.

Now that you have your notes and Anki decks nicely organized, you can start doing this. Since the AAMC offers only 4 full-length practice tests, I decided to create my own AAMC full lengths using the section banks and question packs. This isn't exact and won't give you a scaled score, but it will allow you to avoid third party practice tests (which I really didn't ever want to use), plus it will allow you to build the stamina required for exam day. For example, you can take 60 chemistry questions from the section bank/question packs for section 1, then 60 questions from the CARS section bank for section 2, 60 questions from the biology QP's or bio/biochem SB, and finally 60 practice questions from the P/S SB. On the next one, you can use 60 questions from the physics QP for section 1, etc. Using this method, it's pretty easy to come up with several additional AAMC custom full-lengths. I put all of these practice tests on my calendar, interspersing the official AAMC FL's throughout. I left the AAMC's full-length Exam 2 (many regard this as the most accurate) to take 3 days before my exam date to get an idea of where I stood at that point.

My schedule for this phase was to get started every day at 8:00 AM (when the exam starts). On the first day of the week, I would take a practice test. On the second day of the week, I would do a complete review of the practice test. On the third day, I would study/run Anki flashcards. On the fourth day, I'd work at my job, then repeat.

How you review the practice tests is **very important**. I made it a point to understand not only every question I got right and wrong, but also to understand every graph and table and diagram. This takes *all day*, but official AAMC material is a GOLD MINE!!! I found that making an effort to understand every passage and graph, regardless of whether or not there was a question relating to it, was important in building my confidence, learning more about how to extract information from dense passages, and learning how the AAMC ticks.

STUDENT B: A FEW LAST WORDS TO THE WISE (MCAT SCORE: 521)

1. The content of the MCAT is huge. They're testing you on about 47 credit hours of material. I found that that the material they expect you to know is a mile wide and an inch deep, so don't spend too much time learning everything there is to know on a subject.
2. Remember also that since the material is an inch deep, they try to throw you off by dressing up really simple questions as really complicated ones—don't be fooled.
3. If possible, study in the same place every day. I get easily distracted if I stay home, so I went to the coffee shop and library to study. If possible, walk to the location and back; driving/public transportation is stressful, but walking/jogging removes stress.
4. Finally, keep things in perspective. When I was studying at the coffee shop, I saw someone with an exam prep book that had sciency-looking stuff in it. I asked her if she was prepping for the MCAT—turns out she was prepping for the USMLE. It made me remember that there are hundreds of people who made it past the MCAT and are now in med school.