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.

Please bear in mind that every person will develop an individualized approach that works best for them, but we hope that the following suggestions will point you in the right direction. We wish you all the best with your MCAT prep!

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1. CREATING YOUR STUDY PLAN

1. **Take a Diagnostic Test**
   After you have completed all of the courses with subject matter tested on the MCAT and are ready to start your MCAT prep, the first thing to do is to take the AAMC Sample Test. This test will give you your first taste of working your way through MCAT questions. It will indicate which questions you got right or wrong, but does not provide a scaled score – look for a “score converter” online.

2. **Create an MCAT Study Schedule/Plan**
   If you purchase a set of MCAT prep books, they likely will come with access to sample study plans.

   Many students recommend the Cram Fighter app, which will create a personalized daily study schedule for you based on your test date.

   Also, the AAMC has produced a pamphlet, *How to Create a Study Plan for the MCAT Exam* (free downloadable PDF), that walks you through the process of setting up a study plan, from understanding the basics of the exam to identifying available resources, to drafting your plan and executing it. This is a hefty document.

3. **Plan to devote 250-400 hours to MCAT prep** (after completing all relevant coursework):
   This is a marathon, not a sprint!

4. **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.
2. 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.”

“I wish I would have started studying earlier. It is hard to think about adding more to the workload [of the formal post-bacc program], but the MCAT is not strictly a content-based test. I would have benefited from earlier exposure to the format of passages and questions.”

“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.”
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.

2. Purchase one complete set of MCAT subject review books.
   Most commonly recommended:
   - Examkrackers
   - Kaplan
   - The Princeton Review

3. 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.

4. Highly recommended resources for additional practice problems (if desired):
   - UWorld MCAT Question Bank
     - “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

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).”

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.”

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• **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**
  “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. FULL-LENGTH PRACTICE TESTS

Students who have earned competitive scores on the MCAT most commonly report completing 6 to 8 full-length practice tests prior to taking the MCAT.

#### RECOMMENDED SOURCES FOR PRACTICE TESTS:

1. **AAMC Sample Test**
   - As mentioned above, take this first. It is a representative test that will let you know which questions you got right and wrong, but it does not provide a scaled score.

2. **Official AAMC Practice Tests**
   - Test #2 is considered to be the one with most predictive scoring

3. **BluePrint (formerly NextStep Test Prep) full-length tests**

#### ADVICE FROM STUDENTS ON THE TOPIC OF 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.”

“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.)

5. 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.”

“Concept 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.”

“My Kaplan books were great for content review, but you must do a lot 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 and was slightly disappointed in myself for not studying as much as I planned. However, I think that ultimately focusing on the classes that I was taking was important, 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 (ExamKrackers, Khan Academy).”

“By learning the tools available to you (most valuably, the review function), you can learn to move through the exam very efficiently.”
On exam day, you will complete the sections of the MCAT in the following order (each section is 90 minutes in duration):

1. Chemical and Physical Foundations (C/P)  
   -10 minute break-
2. Critical Analysis and Reading Skills (CARS)  
   -30 minute lunch break-
3. Biology and Biochemical Foundations (B/B)  
   -10 minute break-
4. Psychology and Sociology Foundations (P/S)

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.”

“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.”

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.”

“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?).”

“Read scientific articles and be able to evaluate data representations of all types. This is also true for the Bio/Biochem section. I ran into passages with multiple questions that hinged on correct data interpretation. You should try to make this intuitive for you. 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.”

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 TPR 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.”

“ExamKrackers offers good strategy suggestions for CARS.”

“Personally, I didn’t like the CARS tips offered by The Princeton Review. I started to do better when I stopped using their method. Instead, I just tricked myself into enjoying each passage. Most of them are objectively very interesting.”

“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.”

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.”

“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.”

“Know your amino acids and metabolism! These are very high yield subjects and will break you if you aren’t super comfortable with them. I used my notes from biochemistry class a fair amount while reviewing the questions on my practice test from this section to check that my understanding was thorough.”

“Like the C/P section, the passages are designed to confuse you, so try not to let that intimidate you and trust yourself. Also, since I didn’t take physiology, I had to spend a good deal of time learning all of that content from scratch, as it’s fairly high-yield in this section. I found that, after mastering physiology content, my score improved dramatically. Also, repeat this like a mantra: kinases phosphorylate and phosphatases dephosphorylate!!! 😊”

“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“

“ExamKrackers has a book on Biology that is specifically on Systems – I would highly recommend this book to anyone who hasn’t taken anatomy and physiology coursework.”

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“Taking Human Physiology before studying for the MCAT was very helpful. In contrast, there were very few questions on genetics and cell bio on my test—if you can take it, great, if not, focus on the high-yield topics (e.g. Kidneys, Immune System).”

“I cannot stress the Khan Academy videos enough. I listened to all of them all the time while doing chores, cooking, cleaning, etc., during my 8 weeks of studying, until it was engrained in my brain.”

**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.”

“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.”

“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?)”

“Everything you need to know about PSYC/SOCY can be found on the AMCAS subject list and in the ExamKrackers 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. I started studying this section over winter break then hit it hard in the summer. It’s just lots of memorization.”

“Khan Academy videos, and the transcripts/100 page reddit resource were INVALUABLE for the psych/soc portion of the test. I read the ExamKrackers book beforehand but found it did not have the exact same understanding of the topics that the AAMC did.”

“Kaplan offered some helpful strategies to identify common ‘wrong answer pathologies.’”

“If you study Psych/Soc material over winter break, continue to spend an hour on it per week throughout the spring.”

“I found that studying Psych/Soc after an 8 or 10 hour workday was very helpful. This is the last section of the exam and 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.”
7. 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!”

[For students in the formal post-bacc program:] “If possible, I really would stress 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.”
“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!”

“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.”
9. COMPREHENSIVE ADVICE FROM TWO STUDENTS WHO EACH EARNED NEAR-PERFECT MCAT SCORES

STUDENT A: MY COMPREHENSIVE STUDY PLAN IN 3 STEPS

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

1. The content of the MCAT is huge. They’re testing you on about 47 credit hours of material. I found 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.