Guide to Preparing for the MCAT from 520+ Scorers

Disclaimer: What worked for us might not work for you! Please read the Context and FAQs section and use your best judgment when taking advice from this document. At the end of the day, you know yourself and your needs best. *Last updated on 6-8-2022.*

If you found this guide through TikTok, **click to watch the video** that accompanies this document! I (May) make videos about college, pre-med coursework, etc. that you'll find helpful.

Please read the FAQ before contacting us. Our social media handles can be found here if you want to follow us / need to reach us with a lingering question. Please let May know if a link is broken.

If you'd like to share this on your social media, we're all for it! Share with the link **tiny.cc/may-mcat** and make sure to credit our respective social media accounts. Happy studying!

Video walkthrough of guide (subscribe!)
Corresponding slides (great overview if you're just getting started)
High-yield test-taking strategies
Medical School Application / MCAT Timeline Overview
Medical School Application Guide Video Series
All About Being Pre-Med Playlist
Buy Us Coffee ☕

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Basic Format of the Exam

- No shortcuts here. Read the AAMC resources to learn about the format of the exam.
    - https://students-residents.aamc.org/prepare-mcat-exam/prepare-mcat-exam
    - https://students-residents.aamc.org/about-mcat-exam/about-mcat-exam
        - Download the MCAT Essentials guide in the sidebar and read through it before you start MCAT prep. You'll refer back to it for timing when you start taking practice exams.
- The exam is administered digitally on the computer (not on paper like the SAT). With the exception of COVID-length exam scores which have a 2.5-week turnaround, your score is released ~1 month after you take the exam.
- Must have all necessary equations memorized. No calculators are allowed.
- **4 sections in the following order: C/P (chemistry and physics), CARS (critical reading), B/B (biology and biochemistry), and P/S (psychology and sociology)**
    - **Length:** COVID-length exam is 5 hr 45 min, normal exam is 7.5 hours (6 hr 15 min if not including breaks)
- Go through the AAMC outline for all topics tested on the exam. Note down topics that are particularly difficult for you while you're studying. I used this outline to create my "AAMC Outline" review spreadsheet, in which I noted down topics that I struggled with. (see section on Free Study Schedule and Tracker Templates)

Resources

Resources in green are paid resources, the only paid resource that I think is *absolutely* integral to your preparation is the AAMC material.
***Check to see if you qualify for the Fee Assistance Program, which can cover costs of prep materials.**
Otherwise, text in black indicates free resources. Reddit is a god tier resource that is completely free. Previous MCAT takers have compiled so many quality notes and explanations.

Acronyms
KA = Khan Academy
FL = full-length (refers to practice exam)
JW = Jack Westin CARS practice

	May	Anuva
Content review	Core resources: • **Kaplan books** (didn't read the behavioral or CARS books). *Edition doesn't matter as long as it's after 2015 (MCAT redesign)* • 300pg MCAT Bros **P/S doc from reddit that summarizes the Khan Academy videos** (** Khan Academy collabed with the writers of the MCAT to make the P/S course! KA MCAT courses won't be available 2021 onward but the docs will still be around.) *Supplementary*: • Lab techniques by IWantAHighMCATScore on reddit (AMAZING document) • mcat-review.org online for summaries • Ludwigvan97's completed AAMC outline (only read topics I was fuzzy on; I'd use only for filling in gaps when reviewing the topic outline) This video on fluid mechanics deserves a special shoutout. I'd watch the whole thing if you struggle with fluids. Jack Westin's Content Outline for brief overviews of subjects. It's a mirror of the AAMC outline.	**Exam Kracker books for C/P, Berkeley Review for B/B**, Khan Academy doc from Reddit for P/S, Used Google and Reddit for any extra topics I came across to supplement
	Made my own Anki decks for everything (B/B, P/S, C/P) • In my last month, I made a FL review deck for missed concepts. • Before you ask, I will not be publicly releasing my decks because they contain copyrighted material from UWorld/elsewhere. If you don't want to make your own, there are many available on reddit. I'd recommend MileDown's deck for P/S, which uses cloze formatting (fill-in-the-blank). Other ones: Cubene, premed95, Ortho528 (these are the usernames of the reddit users that created the decks; you can find them through a Google search) *I really think it's worthwhile to make your own P/S deck, though.*	Made own Anki decks for B/B and P/S, used premade Anki decks from Reddit for all subjects at the end

CARS	**AAMC Question Pack** > **TPR Hyperlearning** (can be free… if you catch my drift) / JW > **UWorld CARS** > Khan Academy (too easy and unrepresentative imo) *** save AAMC CARS question packs for the last few weeks. 2021 Update: There is now a new CARS resource provided by the AAMC called the **"MCAT Official Prep CARS Diagnostic Tool"** with 28 passages. Make sure to schedule this in during your final weeks of studying.	**AAMC** > JW/**TPR** (didn't try other CARS materials)
Practice exams	**Blueprint** (previously known as NextStep, great practice. HIGHLY recommend for improving on experimental passages.) ● Took their free half-length diagnostic ● **Bought 4-exam bundle** but didn't have time to take FL4 ● Their QBanks are also great–advantage is you can choose practice by subtopic (i.e. Electrochemistry questions) **Free alternative**: take a free FL from BluePrint, Altius, TPR, Kaplan (FLs come with books), etc. Since the bundles are pricey and I only took 3 third-party FLs, I think the free alternative would work great. I've heard great things about Altius as well, and TPR/Kaplan seem to test more "low-yield" discrete knowledge.	**7 Princeton Review** Exams before AAMC
	ABSOLUTE MUST: **(PAID) AAMC FLs and section banks** > Official Guide / Sample test > science question packs (ordered by priority) Exception: CARS question packs and new CARS diagnostic tool are **the best resource for CARS** aside from FLs	
Reddit resources	Exam explanations: Reddit has an *amazing* spreadsheet with explanations. **r/MCAT** sidebar has a bunch of high-yield resources. Premade Anki decks: MileDown, Cubene, premed95, Ortho528, etc. Ones that were most helpful and central to studying: ● P/S document (89-page or 300-page, choose based on your schedule and time constraints). Primary resource for P/S section. ● MCAT explanations document (BOOKMARK THIS)	

Free Study Schedule and Tracker Templates

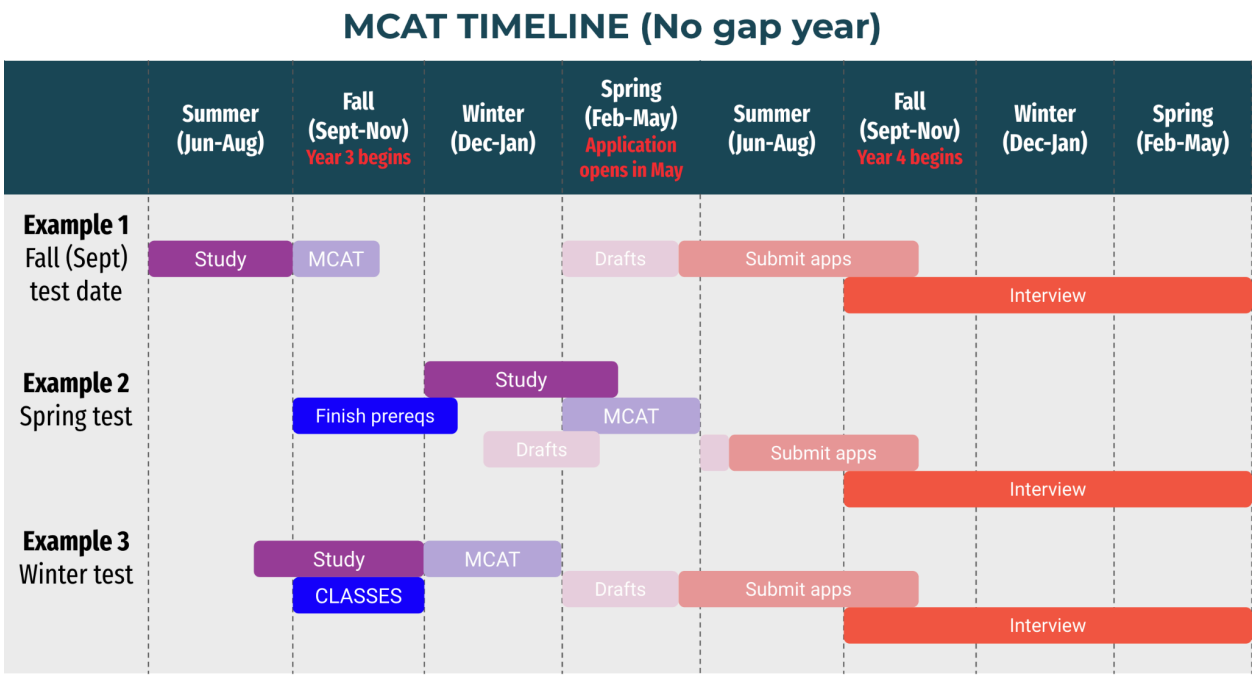
May's Study Schedule

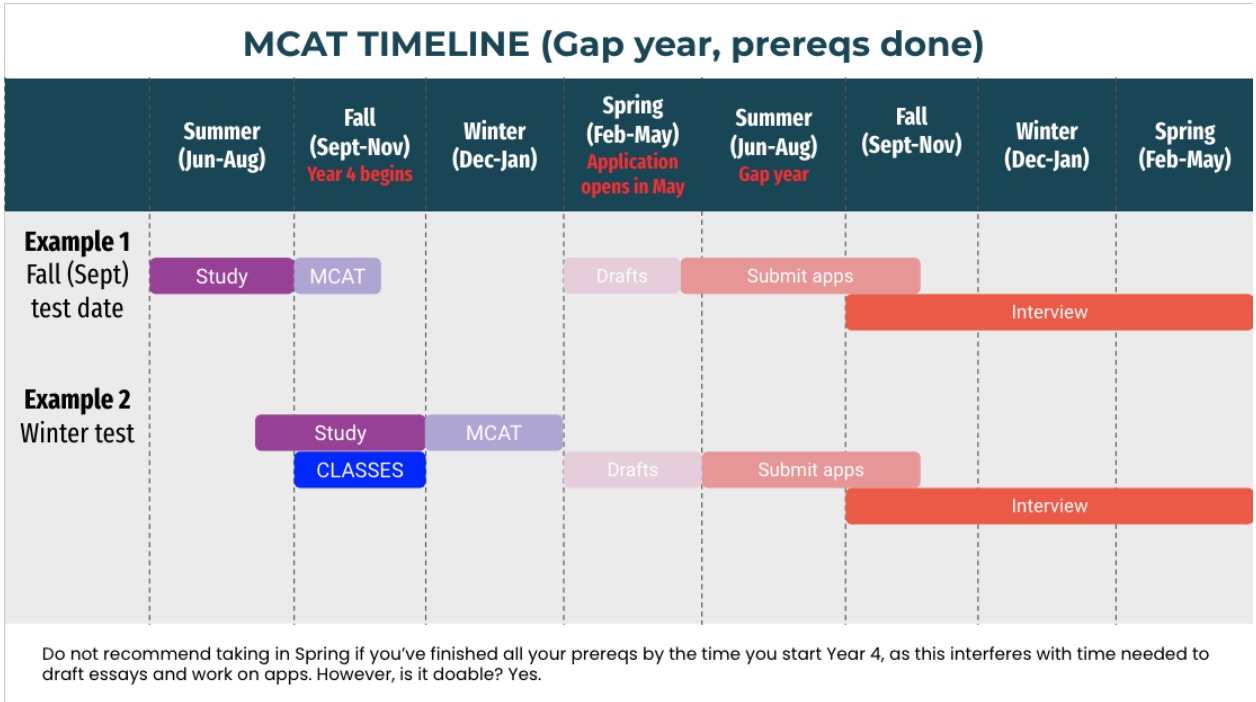
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1gLYyu2q9fS-0G4-9HAxisBvC5UJ3jIWNwqI6bep418M/edit?usp=sharing

May's FL/AAMC Outline Topic Review Spreadsheet

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1jV6F5g0an4UN7yceCEDHtpR6VOIzOIpXXLxq94M-A8g/edit?usp=sharing

Sample Timelines





See additional slides for context within the medical school application timeline.

Context and FAQs

Note: Unless indicated otherwise, the questions in this section were answered by May.

Anuva and I both were studying full-time for our exams at some point. We think it's crucial to focus entirely on the exam in your last month if possible. However, we recognize this is a huge privilege and not everyone is able to do this. So this guide is most directly applicable for those who are *not* doing part-time work for the entire duration of their studying. If you are primarily studying part-time, I'd recommend that you start studying earlier than 3 months out.

- May: I took the shortened exam. My internship was canceled because of the pandemic, so I studied "full-time" for 3-4 months. The first 3 months I was writing a fellowship application and doing research-related work remotely. My last 5-6 weeks were fully committed to studying for the exam.
- Anuva: I took the normal-length exam. During the summer, I was mainly focusing on studying, but I also supplemented my weeks with volunteering because I knew I would get too antsy. But for the last month before my exam (during my winter break), I did not do anything at all but study.

Should I take a prep course?

- (May) I strongly believe prep courses are counterproductive in most situations. However, if you do decide to take a prep course, I'd recommend a self-paced option.
    - Pros: Courses force you to stay on a set schedule they have created, which helps some students that struggle with discipline and self-motivation. I personally thought I'd struggle a lot with discipline / making my own schedule, but I'm REALLY glad I didn't take a prep course. Once I committed to my schedule, sticking to it wasn't much of an issue, especially with the adrenaline of the last 1-1.5 months.
        - Some prep courses might have TAs or instructors who can answer your individual questions.
        - Might be helpful for non-traditional applicants, but I can't speak to this.
    - Cons: Extremely **expensive** (can be upwards of 1k!!!!!!), pacing is not tailored to your strengths/weaknesses. All material you'd ever need to know for the MCAT is available online, so I don't think access to resources is a viable argument for taking a prep course.
        - "The MCAT is hard, and the MCAT is important" will haunt you as you are watching videos on YouTube (joking, but on a more serious note–I question the 515+ guarantee of these courses.)
- (Anuva) I took a prep course during the summer, but honestly did not really like it and branched away from it to set up my own independent schedule. I used some of their resources but didn't think it was absolutely necessary. For the last month before my

exam, I created my own schedule based on the remaining resources I had and felt confident in studying on my own.

- As May said, I think prep courses are good if you are taking the MCAT a long time after taking the courses in college because it may be helpful to get the material from someone else who is more familiar. Prep courses may also be useful if you don't have upperclassmen friends or other friends that took the MCAT that can help you develop a realistic schedule.
- If you feel you have developed adequate study discipline from your undergrad classes, I think that there are enough free resources out there to help you develop a tailored study plan that suits your needs.
- If you have pre-med related clubs at your school, I would highly recommend joining them so that you can meet upperclassmen that can give you ~free~ advice on how to study.

When should I start studying?

- This is really dependent on when you want to apply to medical school, your schedule, time constraints, as well as whether you've finished your requirements.
    - I don't recommend self-studying for subjects you haven't taken in college yet unless you are extremely self-motivated and have ample time on your hands. Some people think you can self-study physics for example (and I know folks who have successfully done so). However, I knew that in my case, I would not be comfortable doing so and opted to take the MCAT after my junior year (+ take a single gap year before medical school) after I finished all my pre-med requirements.
    - **If you are applying without a gap year**, you should take the MCAT either the summer after your sophomore year, January after your junior fall, or in your junior spring while you are in school (which I personally would not recommend, as it does not give you time to potentially retake if necessary).
    - Summarily, I recommend that you take the MCAT **after you have finished your requirements**, preferably right after taking biochemistry (I took the MCAT a year after taking biochem and relearning metabolic pathways was a pain).
    - Nonexhaustive list of coursework you should have under your belt: Bio (Physio, Genetics is really helpful but not required), Biochem, Physics (Kinematics > Electricity & Magnetism), Gen Chem, Orgo 1 (Orgo 2 might help, but mechanisms aren't heavily tested on the exam. You should know reactions like aldol condensation, retro-aldol, nucleophilic substitutions at minimum)
        - **Sociology and psychology are self-studiable and, in my opinion, formal coursework isn't necessary**. But I might also be biased because I'm concentrating in public health and love behavioral sciences! If you know you're not interested in this subject area and feel like you'd struggle learning all of it for the first time (since P/S is the most rote memorization-heavy topic debatably), you might consider taking a course beforehand.

- Variations in schedules (duration, intensity)
    - I know people who do a summer internship for 3 months and study part-time then dedicate the last month to complete MCAT studying. Others study full-time for 2-3 months. You could also spread out your studying over half a year doing part-time. I am hesitant to recommend studying for even longer than that, because maintaining information for that long requires a lot of consistent review.
    - Ultimately, I think you eventually need to reach a level of intensity (8+ hours a day) or set a total hour goal. For context, I estimated that I spent around 800 hours total preparing for the MCAT.
- Anuva started content review in the summer, then took STEM courses (biochem, orgo) during the semester and didn't study specifically for the MCAT. She spent about a month intensively studying for the MCAT before her exam in January.

How did you pace your review? Should I interleave topics or finish a book at a time?

(May) I found that interleaving topics was really helpful. Here was my weekly topic schedule during content review:

Sunday	**Monday**	**Tuesday**	**Wednesday**	**Thursday**	**Friday**	**Saturday**
Gen Chem/Bio	Biochem/Orgo	Psych/Phys	Gen Chem/Bio	Biochem/Orgo	Psych/Phys	Break day/light Anki

- Note that I fell off schedule QUITE often. I aimed to do two chapters each day (one from each topic area listed)
    - Just make sure you're planning 1-2 weeks in advance and make sure you're on track with all the materials you want to complete by test day.
    - I finished my content review rather slowly over 9 weeks. For reference, if you religiously stick to 2 chapters/day, you should finish in a little over a month.
- Why do I think interleaving is *better* than doing one book at a time?
    - Prevents burnout and boredom (I could NOT do biochem, which is super dense, all at once.)
    - Allowed me to make really important connections between subject material.
- **Make sure you're doing periodic active recall.** Don't leave all your Anki cards until the last few weeks… You'll end up forgetting a lot of what you learned in content review. More on this in the "Content Review" section.
- (Anuva) Sometimes it may help to have weekly goals instead of daily goals. It's easier to push over some content onto the next day if you didn't finish without feeling guilty or demoralized for not sticking to the daily schedule. Some days you might have more time or motivation than others, so I found that setting weekly agenda tasks served me better during the summer. In the winter, I devoted my entire day to MCAT, so I was more rigid in completing my daily scheduled topics and tasks.

What are the test questions like? Should I take a diagnostic?

- I personally think there's no harm in taking a diagnostic as early as possible. You won't feel like you're "ready," but I think you'll be surprised with how much you know from your classes. This is just to get a baseline understanding of how the test is formatted and informs how you should approach your content review.
- Most questions on the MCAT require **application of knowledge**, as they are passage-based. There are also discretes that are simple "you either know it or you don't" questions (see section on Basic Format of Exam) but they do not make up the majority of the exam.
    - For example, you're going to encounter *more* questions like "How does the amino acid substitution described in the passage impact the interaction between substrate X and enzyme Y?" than "Which is not a step of the Citric Acid Cycle?" though both types can show up.
- (Anuva) I would recommend taking a diagnostic as early as possible; don't be scared of getting a low score initially. I think it will give you a sense of what the questions are like and perhaps help you orient how you should study and what kinds of details you should focus on. It can also serve as a reality check (as it was for me) as to how different this test may be than the tests that you are used to taking in your science classes in undergrad.

How did you review your full-lengths?

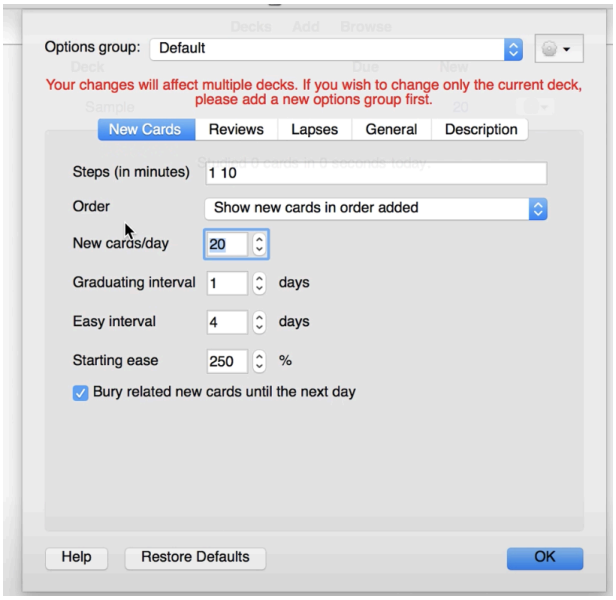
- See section "Last Month!"

How do you use Anki?

This is a quickstart guide. I'd recommend The AnKing on YouTube for more in-depth tutorials.

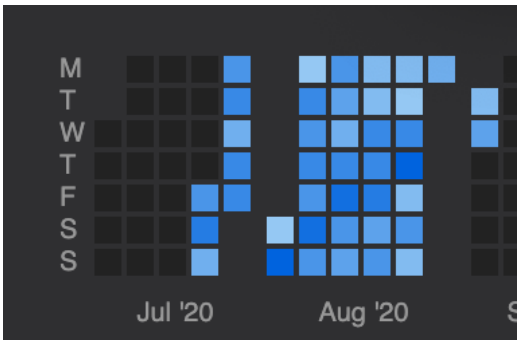
- Download Anki.
- Install add-ons. This video will show you how to install a ton of add-ons at once. My favorite is the review heatmap, just because it's pretty and keeps me accountable with my studying. In terms of making cards, I primarily used Cloze and Frozen Fields. ReMemorize is also helpful for custom scheduling your cards.
    - Familiarize yourself with basic functions like Bury. Honestly, I still don't really know what this does but I used Bury when I wanted to answer the flashcard again later.
- Download the deck(s) you want to use and import to Anki.

    You will see only something like 20 cards per deck. This is because your settings are set to 20 new cards/day (highlighted in image below). Change this number to an arbitrarily large number, like 10000000.



I wouldn't tinker much with the remaining settings.

- If you will be making your own decks, you will likely only be using the Front/Back flashcard and Cloze functionalities. Cloze is synonymous with fill-in-the-blank.
    - Click here for a written tutorial.
- How's the learning curve for using Anki?
    - It took me a few days to get the basics down. I would recommend Anki over Quizlet, if anything just to access and use pre-made decks on reddit.
    - Anki was a consistent part of my study routine. Toward the end of my studying, I squeezed in anywhere from 350-750 cards per day for a couple of hours. Here's a screenshot of my review heatmap. (Lighter blue = more cards reviewed that day, darkest blue = usually <50 cards because I was busy or tired)

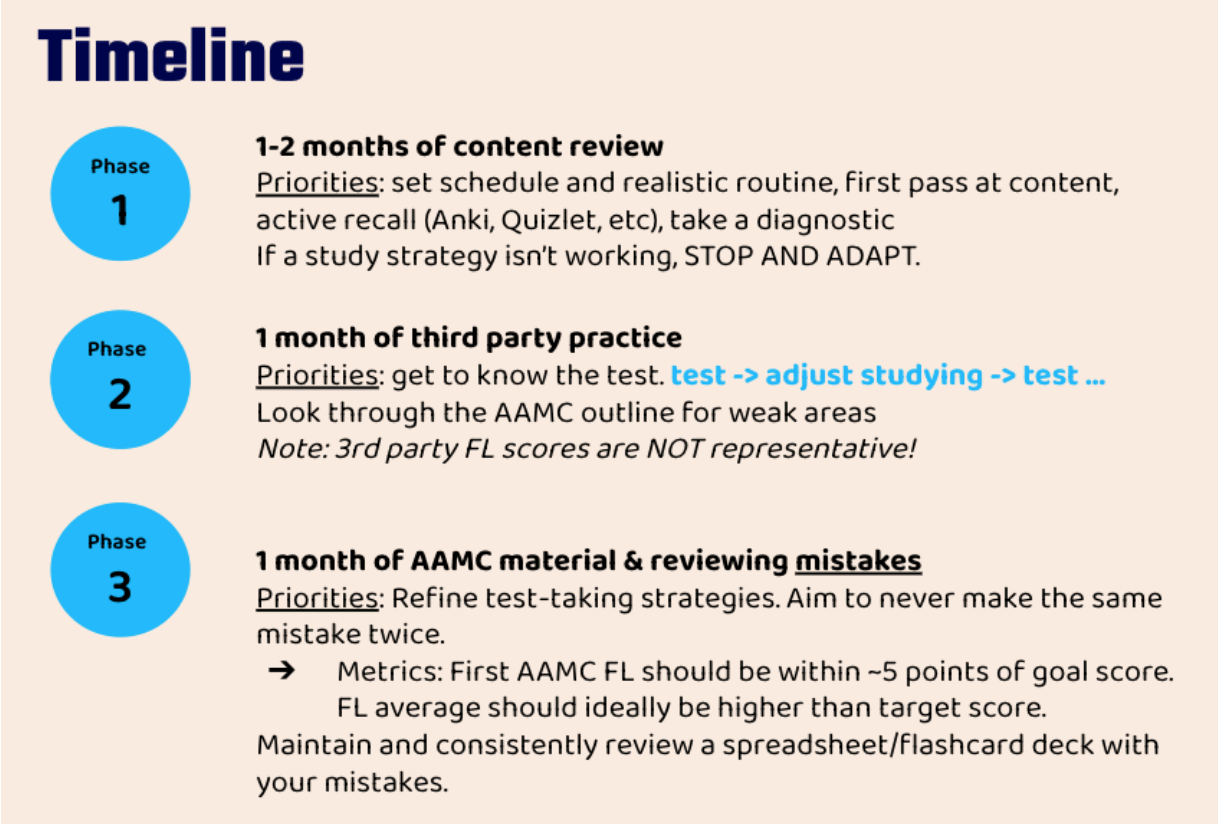


Can you share your Anki decks?

We will not be sharing our Anki decks because they contain copyrighted material from third party companies. I recommend that you make your own deck for P/S anyway (or adding your own cards to a premade deck), since the public decks listed in the resources section have some content gaps.

May's 3.5-Month Timeline and Advice

Timeline Overview



Depending on your background in the sciences, you can adapt this schedule to 2 months (1 month content review, 1 month practice) or 4+ months (longer period for content review, maintain same length of time for practice). I personally studied for close to four months and felt very prepared by the last two weeks. My last week, I didn't study too much and mostly relaxed and reviewed AAMC material + Anki cards.

Content review

- First, set a start date to commit to studying and then build a rough schedule.
    - This was one of the *hardest* parts of studying for the MCAT. I was dreading starting, but committing to my study plan while allowing some minimal flexibility was crucial to not having to reschedule my test date.
    - Get off reddit. Reading 520+ success stories isn't helping you get there. This guide summarizes all you need to know from what we've researched on reddit.
- Prep books are just a first pass of the content.

    - I felt that Kaplan didn't cover all the "low-yield" content possible, but it was a very good foundation to build off of.
- Learn from my mistake: If you finish a chapter and are still confused, GOOGLE AND WATCH VIDEOS instead of saying "I'll review it later after I finish all the books"–actively study things that are hard for you on the way rather than letting it go under the radar.
    - I told myself I'd go back to my college class notes and I NEVER did. It's also just not necessary to refer to class notes, as they tend to be too narrow/detailed.
    - AK Lectures (https://aklectures.com/) is a fantastic free resource for biochemistry. It was more helpful for me to watch videos than read the chapters on TCA/metabolism in Kaplan (visuals are super helpful).
    - Chad's Prep for physics review.
- I would recommend that you do NOT take excessive written notes; if you do, only write down major topics you need to review. Taking detailed notes was a *huge* time drain for me.
    - I made really detailed Anki cards (4000+ in total probably) from my handwritten notes and never finished 1000 of my B/B cards. Keep up with your cards as you do content review!
    - I barely made it through my P/S deck. I really had to cram up until the last day before my exam.
    - In this same vein, **if a study method isn't working for you, STOP doing it.** This sounds straightforward, but I literally just kept taking written notes because I wanted to "for the sake of completion," which is the worst reasoning possible.
    - Anki helped me get super minute details correct, especially in P/S. I'd recommend making flashcards in lieu of notes. See next point.
- **ACTIVE RECALL IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.** If you take anything away from this, it is that if you just read the books and call it a day, you will not retain most of the information. Granted, you will be doing a second/third pass of the info in practice exams. But if you really want to retain all that "low-yield" info, make sure you're doing Anki cards AS YOU STUDY. I.e. On your break day, you might do 100 Anki cards (which, if the info is fresh, shouldn't take more than an hour or so).
    - I left all my cards for the last month and wasn't able to finish my bio deck!
    - If Anki is too convoluted for you, try Quizlet or GoogleSheets (link to Ali Abdaal's video on this method)
    - Some information is not conducive to learning via Anki. For example, drawing out metabolic pathways. In my last 2-ish weeks, I drew out glycolysis and TCA cycles in their entirety. It's hard at first, but soon it'll just take you 5 min.
- Brief word on CARS
    - For full transparency, this is the section I can give least advice on (my practice FL scores ranged from 126-130 with 128 on the actual exam).
        - Find out why you're getting questions wrong.
            - For me, I really struggled with timing. **Do NOT go over 10 min per passage or you'll really struggle toward the end.**
        - Find the supporting detail for your answer in the passage. Be able to justify the answer you chose.

        - Be consistent with this practice–try to do a few passages first thing each morning (but don't beat yourself up if you skip a few days. Like leg day, I skipped… a lot).
    - See Anuva's (incredibly thorough!) section on how she tackled CARS prep.
    - Additional resources: This video or this one might be helpful in figuring out how to improve your CARS strategy.

Third-party practice

- There was a HUGE learning curve involved when starting practice exams around 2 months out. I struggled a lot with dealing with nerves, for instance, at the beginning of the C/P section seeing such dense experimental passages. Don't worry, it *will* get better with practice.
- Don't focus too much on hitting an "ideal" number of practice exams. I'd say that at LEAST two months out, you should be taking at least one practice full-length a week
    - I took a half-length diagnostic, 3 Blueprint exams, and all the AAMC exams.
    - Better to review each thoroughly than cram many exams.
- Use these exams as an opportunity to improve, NOT as a reflection of where you're at score-wise.
    - FL scores from third party companies are notoriously deflated.
    - I was scoring ~511-514 range on BluePrint FLs right before my final month of studying. My AAMC FL1 was a 517, around four weeks out. My AAMC FL average was ~522.
- Go through the AAMC outline if you haven't already. Highlight topics you still struggle with and review! Test your knowledge with questions in that specific area, i.e. using free Khan Academy passages or a third party QBank.
- I recommend that you block out a full day for reviewing your exams. Check my spreadsheet for how I reviewed exam answers. If you finish early (you probably won't until your last few FLs), use your extra time to practice with Anki or look at your review spreadsheets.
    - Before taking another full-length practice, review your spreadsheet from the week before.
    - You should be spending a lot of time looking up concepts you're still fuzzy on. Analyze your test-taking strategies and patterns as well.
        - This helped me improve my C/P section from my worst non-CARS section (sub-130) to my best section (131-132 consistently on AAMC FLs). See next section on how I reviewed my AAMC FLs.
- UWorld MCAT QBank
    - A *golden* resource but pricey. I did them in 48-question chunks, mimicking a full section. See my MCAT study routine video for more on how I used this.
        - If you're deciding between buying FL exams and UWorld, I'd recommend buying UWorld MCAT QBank and using free exams from test prep companies (see Resources).

    - This trickled into my last month of prep. I did all the questions in a little over 2 weeks but it was all I was doing.
    - You could also use UWorld alongside content review (i.e. after reading a chapter of organic chemistry, do the corresponding topic questions on UWorld). Up to you! I just like doing all my practice at once when I feel like I'm prepared.

Last Month!

- Save the section banks for when you feel prepared, this is the hardest prep material and is really great practice. I did this about a month out, which, in my opinion, was still pretty early because it took me ~3 days to finish all of it.
    - I redid all section banks again about 1.5-2 weeks out. Ideally you should score 96-100% the second time around.
- Take your first AAMC FL around 4 weeks out from your test date. Your score should ideally be within 5 points of your goal. If it isn't, consider moving your test date or wait until FL2 to decide.
    - I scored 3 points below my target score on FL1.
    - Don't worry about the sample test (which is now free, by the way) score, since it's not reflective even with the score conversion.
- When taking AAMC FLs, simulate test conditions as much as possible.
    - Buy a cheap keyboard and mouse if you can, **get used to shortcuts–they save SO MUCH TIME (alt + H for highlight, alt + S for strikethrough)**
    - Don't take excessive breaks in between sections. Stick to the timing allotted.
    - Wear headphones during your AAMC practice tests if you want to use the test center's on test day. I wore a mask to simulate my testing conditions given COVID.
- When reviewing your FLs, think critically about why you get things wrong, since it's **not always due to knowledge gaps.** Beyond around a 515, test-taking strategies and reading comprehension are key to improvement.
    - For example, I learned that I would be really nervous at the beginning of C/P and make a LOT of errors. So I budgeted time to review my answers in the last 10 minutes and focus primarily on the beginning of the exam. This *drastically* improved my section score and was a huge breakthrough for me.
    - **PROCESS OF ELIMINATION** is a valid way of improving your score. My score really improved once I started adopting this test-taking strategy.
- **How did I review exams and UWorld questions?**
    - See my FL review spreadsheet
    - How I used UWorld
        - I would carefully review the detailed explanations for all of the questions and make Anki cards for things I felt fuzzy on.
        - I redid the physics questions a few days before my exam because I was most antsy about this topic area.
    - If you struggle with lab techniques, read this document.

- MCAT explanations spreadsheet on reddit has amazing explanations for major AAMC material and also some third party exams.
- Generally, I'd just google the topic area I got wrong and go down a rabbit hole. Here are some websites I had bookmarked:
  - mcat-review.org had good summaries for topic areas I missed
  - Khan Academy MCAT videos (Might not be available on KA by the time you read this document. I'm sure people on reddit have the videos saved somewhere else.)
  - Physics
    - Chad's Prep for Physics (Free)
    - Special shoutout to this video on fluid mechanics by MCAT Disciples.
  - Biochem
    - AK Lectures (Free)
  - Psych/Soc
    - Anki, Anki, Anki. I never had trouble with this section because I prioritized my P/S Anki deck.
    - The toughest questions in this section in my opinion deal with experimental design and types of variables. Do your due diligence researching these topics–UWorld also has great explanations for these types of questions. Some examples of things to know:
      - Observational study designs and how they compare to experimental studies
      - Difference between moderating, mediating, and confounding variables
      - Various biases
    - Also, when you're studying, make sure you have an applied example of each of the concepts. Knowing definitions is **not enough**. Be able to list a real-life example in your head.
  - Wikipedia (rarely, too in-depth for MCAT purposes)
- When reviewing things you get wrong, make sure to review the **topic at large**, not just the specific detail you missed. For example, if I got a question wrong about fast-twitch muscles, I'd review all the muscle fiber types.
- ***Also, aside from the questions you know you had trouble with, pay special attention to questions you **1) flagged and got right** and **2) didn't flag and got wrong.** #2 is especially important for hammering your weaknesses.

- In the last week or so, focus on really nailing your weak points. It's ok to brush up on things you're comfortable with just to keep them fresh (like biochem pathways), but I personally used the last week to cram as much knowledge into short-term memory as possible. People say not to use this time for low-yield concepts, but I was pretty comfortable with general high-yield topics at this point that I just focused on learning a ton of small details that could come up.
  - **I thought about which topics I'd *dread* seeing on test day and forced myself to review those.**
  - I also did a final run through of my review spreadsheet, where I had noted down things I'd missed and information I knew I would want to review in the last week.

- I'm down to the last few days of prep. What do you think are the most important things I should review?
    - Concepts you got wrong (i.e. your review deck on Anki)
    - Physics equations
    - P/S details (Anki deck)
        - i.e. Erickson, Piaget, Freud, Kohlberg, etc. stages
        - Age cohorts (Silent generation, Baby boomers,...) and their year cutoffs
        - etc.

Closing Notes and What to Expect on Test Day

- **Make sure you visit your test location a few days beforehand just to make sure you don't get lost.**
- Don't change your routine right before test day. Wear what makes you feel comfortable. Don't exercise vigorously the day before unless your body is used to it.
- I had an unusual test experience because of COVID-19 changes to the MCAT, but you essentially get placed into a room with a bunch of cubicles that have "soundproof" dividers between them. They give you headphones that block sound (not entirely). I wore them and didn't think they were terribly uncomfortable. You scan your palm to enter and leave the test room for breaks. It took 20 seconds max. I was told to begin the exam immediately after I checked in, despite being pretty early (so use the bathroom/do what you need to do before checking in). I ended up using 6 minutes of each of my breaks to use the restroom and eat a granola bar by my locker. There was a clock in the waiting room where the lockers were, but this might not be the case at your test center.
    - I was oddly calm the day before the exam. Slept like a baby. Felt confident going into the exam. I cannot stress enough how important it is that you hype yourself up for this exam.
    - I expected to feel nervous starting C/P and I did. That's ok. As I said before, I knew I'd make mistakes in the beginning, but I budgeted time to check my answers. C/P and P/S ended up being my best sections.
    - What I didn't expect on test day: I was quite distracted, partly because I really wanted to leave (just being honest) and partly because I was worried about my performance on the previous section(s). I don't think this is generally an issue for most people, but I think it's why my score was a little lower than my FL average. I could also sort of hear people entering/leaving the room because the breaks are staggered. Again, I don't think this is an issue for most people because you'll probably be in the zone.
        - **Do your best not to ruminate on how you did in the previous section. Reset your mind. Use your breaks to drink water and use the restroom. Take a few deep breaths before going back to take your exam.**

- **Do not void the exam unless there was some extenuating circumstance that hindered your performance on the exam**. It's ok to know that you got a few things wrong! This test is based on a bell-curve, after all.
- **TRUST your full length average, given that you have simulated test-taking conditions to the best of your ability.**
    - You generally should expect to score within ±3 points of your FL average, which was true for both Anuva and me.
- You're either going to feel relieved, elated, or like trash after the exam. I was definitely the lattermost and thought I did terribly. I thought I bombed the B/B section and couldn't stop fixating on it. I genuinely cannot convey to you how bad I felt… My friends can all attest I was NOT happy about how I did.
    - To my surprise, I did well on the section and it was reflective of my FL averages. In fact, all of my section scores were within a point of what I expected/usually scored.
    - Your perception of how you did is VERY flawed because you fixate on what you might have gotten wrong and not what you likely got correct.
    - DO NOT TRY TO GOOGLE ANSWERS OR READ REDDIT THREADS AFTER. CELEBRATE. REST. You deserve to not think about the MCAT until score release.

Best of luck! Sending good energy your way.
- May

Anuva's 9(ish)-month Timeline and Advice

Timeline Overview

- I started studying the summer after sophomore year–I had taken all pre-med subjects except for biochemistry and organic chemistry 2, which I was planning on taking the following fall.
    - Because I didn't want to take a gap year, I wanted to take my exam in January of junior year to give me enough time after to either plan for a retake in March/April or start working on my applications.
- During the summer, I felt really overwhelmed with studying due to all the material and kind of went brute force in terms of content review. I feel like I wasn't super efficient with my time, but I read my prep books and wrote notes and made Anki decks to not forget concepts.
    - While I started off writing notes, I realized it was way too tedious and that I would never look back at my notes. I switched entirely to Anki for P/S and Bio/Biochem in the latter part of the summer, and kept up with my Anki deck almost every day.
    - You'll see that I didn't emphasize Chem/Phys a lot in my study process–I felt strong in my understanding on those topics, and knew I needed to focus on my weaker points.
        - That's a tip I have: **Identify your strong subjects** and don't spend extra time on them because you want to perfect material you don't know, not what you know.
- By the end of the summer, I was scoring around 507s on Princeton Review Tests and felt okay about my subjects except for Ochem and Biochem, but still didn't feel super confident about my ability on the exam. Perhaps studying so far in advance didn't develop the urgency and stress in me, but I felt like I had somewhat of a foundation to set me up when I started studying intensely again during winter break.
- I spent my winter break going into full focus for the exam. This was not ideal, but I had to be super focused since I hadn't really formally studied or done MCAT practice questions during my fall semester.
    - Again, I felt pretty confident about C/P and P/S at that point, so I focused most of my energy to B/B and CARS.
    - During the first two weeks of break, I did a chapter of Berkeley Review General Biology and Biochemistry a day. From what I remember, there were about 10 sections total, so I got through them in about 12-14 days, doing all of the practice questions at the end.
        - Especially in the last push of studying, make sure you are spending at least equal or more time to ACTIVELY engage with material instead of just reading concepts. Active learning doesn't just look like doing practice questions–you can write out concepts from memory or make guides from memory. Just make sure you are using the part of your brain that recalls information instead of just absorbing it.

        - For CARS, I decided to not look at any third party practice material because I didn't want all the conflicting logic approaches to confuse me. I ONLY did AAMC QPack 1 and 2 to hone in on my CARS logic (see general tips for how I approached CARS).
    - During the last 2-3 weeks of break, I spread out the AAMC material (4 FLs), section bank, and other science QPacks.
    - I also did UWorld during this time. UWorld really helped push me up a couple points I think because their passages are most similar to the AAMC material out of any third party resource and really helped me build necessary skills of experimental analysis (see general tips for how I approached passages).

Choosing Prep Books

- In terms of picking books, I did a lot of research on Reddit to learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of each company. I found that EK has a very nice layout and was easy to digest, so I was drawn to it. However, EK also glossed over some topics and didn't go AS in depth as some other companies. That's why I chose it for C/P because I was already strong in that. I found that the Berkeley Review was suuuper in depth and chose it for B/B since that was the subject I felt least confident about. Everyone on Reddit recommended the Khan Academy doc, so I didn't even think about using another book for that.
    - You don't have to buy separate books for each subject like I did–one set will do the same job.
    - However, I would say that each company probably has SOME weakness, and it's impossible for every book to have every nuanced detail that could show up on the exam.
    - Supplement your content review with the AAMC PDF (https://students-residents.aamc.org/media/8716/download) and use Google/Khan Academy/AK Lectures to fill in all the gaps that your books don't cover.

How to approach studying during school

- Personally, I had the intention of studying during my Fall semester, but I got really busy with coursework and took on more leadership, so I couldn't manage my time effectively to fit in the MCAT.
    - It wasn't too big of a deal for me I think since I was taking biochem and ochem was effectively me studying for the exam through these two classes and honing my skills in scientific understanding and analysis.
    - I was also still working as a tutor biology, chemistry, and physics on the side.
        - This is one tip that I haven't seen mentioned before and thought contributed to my MCAT success. If you can/are interested, I would highly recommend tutoring science classes to strengthen your understanding of

the material. Tutoring doesn't feel as tedious as "studying" in the normal sense, but it still helps you view and solidify concepts by thinking about it from other people's perspectives. (Also something great to add to your pre-med resume!)

- However, if you are not taking classes for subjects on the MCAT or tutoring during the semester, I would say to make sure to create a feasible schedule to balance studying during the semester and not put it off.
    - Try to be realistic with your course material to make sure you can juggle the MCAT on top of it since studying for the MCAT can feel like an entire course itself. Many people that I know that studied during the semester took less units to make time for the MCAT.
    - I didn't create a plan for my fall and just assumed I would have time for practice tests and Anki, but I really just ended up putting all MCAT-related stuff off for winter break since I hadn't been realistic with the amount of time I would (in this case wouldn't) have during the semester.

Approaching CARS and Experiment-Based Questions

- How did I approach CARS?
    - To be honest, CARS was really demoralizing for me at first, since that was my worst section on the SAT (lol), and I also wasn't taking classes that necessarily refined my skills of close reading before I took the MCAT.
    - However, I decided to approach CARS like I approach science: by finding patterns and creating an algorithm in my mind. I started with the Passage a Day on Jack Westin's website and started off pretty rough, getting 2/6's consistently and not knowing how to manage my time, switching between passage and question much too often.
        - I decided to break up my approach into parts. First, instead of trying to master the logic of CARS, I recognized that I simply needed to improve my fast reading skills. For the first couple weeks, I still did about 4-5 JW passages every morning, but more than perfecting the logical analysis, I simply tried to get my reading time for the entire passage under 4 minutes–making sure that I was reading slow enough to capture the author's tone but fast enough to finish with 4-5 minutes remaining to analyze the questions.
        - As I improved on my reading skills, I recognized that I was able to capture the main idea of the passage more effectively and my scores on JW began to improve (albeit with still probably a large standard deviation).
        - However, as I started taking Princeton Review practice tests, I recognized that the logic I had developed for the JW passages did not match TPR's and my scores on TPR CARS were still pretty low and inconsistent.
            - I thought that perhaps the logic approaches that each company used were not standardized to each other or the AAMC and I

began to take my scores on these third party exams with a grain of salt.
    - When doing the third party tests, I began to focus more on finishing the section in time and really focusing on understanding the entire passage in the time constraint. I also used these 3rd party CARS tests to experiment with different highlighting or reading techniques.
        - With trial and error, I sometimes read the questions first and then the passage. Sometimes I highlighted sentences, sometimes just words, and sometimes I didn't highlight.
        - Over the course of the summer, I recognized how I liked to approach CARS: I liked just reading the whole passage first to develop my understanding of the author's argument and tone without having the questions influence my opinions. I also preferred highlighting key words that offered the author's subjective opinion.
        - Also, I tried to minimize looking back at the passage after reading it in the first 4 minutes. I think that the questions very rarely ask about specific details and they care more about the overall "feel" of the passage and the author's main tone and idea. Reading into specific sentences after would just confuse me and I began to realize that my original "gut" about the author's idea usually led me in the right direction. Of course, this only came with experimentation with many CARS passages both during the summer and then again during the winter when I just focused on AAMC CARS.
        - Though my scores were stagnant over the summer in CARS, I began to feel more confident about my approach and my timing of the passages.
- I didn't really study for CARS during the semester, but during the winter, as I mentioned earlier, I JUST did AAMC CARS. As I mentioned a couple points above, I was skeptical about third party's logic for CARS and wanted to focus on just understanding the way AAMC writers wanted me to approach the passages.
    - I did CARS QPack 1 very slowly at first. Reading through the explanations for wrong and right answers (even if I got the question right). I wanted to pretend that I was the AAMC writer, and my intention was to get into their head and figure out their thought process. Remember, your job is not to agree or disagree with their logic. I don't care what your opinion on the AAMC questions are–your job is to UNDERSTAND their approach and replicate it on the exam. As I mentioned, I treated CARS like science.
    - CARS Qpack 1 was in fact very difficult–I got a 43% on the first 60 questions (lol), but I saw that for the second half of the Qpack and Qpack 2, my CARS scores really started to go up, and I felt way more confident about CARS.
- <u>TLDR for CARS</u>: I would suggest using third party CARS practice to develop your

skills of fast reading and figuring out your passage approach techniques (highlighting, reading questions first, writing notes, etc.). Take third party CARS logic with a grain of salt. AAMC CARS logic is the holy grail–take CARS Qpack 1 and 2 VERY seriously. Your job is to get into the AAMC writers' brains and learn how they would analyze the passage. Put away your analysis skills and learn those of the writers.

- How did I approach experiment-based science questions?
    - Over time, I recognized that the biggest thing that questions wanted me to look for was the main gist of the experiment (independent / dependent variables and the main results) and sometimes the diagrams/graphs that they provided. Even if I didn't understand ALL the jargon in the passage, I didn't let that deter me.
        - To make sure I was focusing on the key points, I highlighted very sparingly. Similar to CARS, I only highlighted **keywords** because I thought that highlighting sentences would not be effective and would not help me identify key points if I wanted to go back and reference the passage after the questions.
    - I would recommend creating a "system" to approach experiment based problems because they can be very overwhelming. Use your practice questions to experiment with different approaches. That's the whole point of practice: to come up with a definitive system for the real AAMC stuff. It's okay to make mistakes in practice because those mistakes are only going to help you solidify your approach for the real exam.
        - For me, I highlighted important words (molecule names, experimental methods, etc–stuff that I think would come up in the questions)
        - I identified the independent and dependent variables in each study to get a sense of what was being tested and what information the researcher was trying to find
        - This helped orient me to understanding the gist and point of the experiment
        - They often give a lot of extraneous information, so it's your job to parse through it and not get overwhelmed

General Tips

- I took 5 TPR exams during the summer and 2 during my fall semester, and they were definitely really hard and kind of demoralizing at times. However, they helped me build the skills to focus for 7 hours (lol). I averaged around 507-510, which is a full 10+ points under what I scored.
    - You will see a large jump when you go from 3rd party exams to AAMC so take your third party scores with a grain of salt.
- Focus on practice questions and other active learning techniques. Reading is only passive learning and you won't retain information you just see. Transfer all new concepts into Anki or make sure to do all the relevant practice questions after each chapter to

make sure you are developing your RECALL skills of what you read.

- I also highly recommend using the AAMC PDF in your last month to make sure you know all the low-yield topics.
    - I highlighted all the topics I didn't know in the PDF and used Khan Academy and AK Lectures to understand the things that weren't covered in my prep books. Prep books cannot be comprehensive since there is simply so much material out there. Take control of your own study path and seek out the extra resources to cover all your bases.
    - I also checked reddit.com/r/mcat every day during winter break because a) I'm neurotic and b) I tried to answer the questions that other people posted because it enhanced my own understanding of the material and helped me fill in any niche content gaps.
        - You can see I am a BIG proponent of the teach back method when it comes to studying anything.
- Ending thoughts: No one feels good about how they did after the exam, but you MUST trust all the work that you put in over the past few months.
    - As long as you feel good about the practice and hours you put in, ~try~ to spend the next couple weeks relaxing as you wait for your score to come out. (You deserve it!)
    - Contrary to May, I did spend a lot of time on Reddit while I was waiting for my score because it felt nice to see that other people were as stressed as I was, but to each their own.

And with that, I send you off on your MCAT journey!

Contact Us

If you have lingering questions about the MCAT/pre-med or just want to see what else we're up to, here is our contact information. Our DMs are always open!

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See a mistake?

If you see anything that you think is inaccurate or could be improved in this document, please contact mayzqg@gmail.com to share your feedback. If you've finished taking the MCAT and would like to collaborate on this document, please also let us know!

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If you enjoyed this guide and ~feel so inclined~ you can buy us coffee/boba. :-) You can also Venmo @mayzgao and funds will be split evenly between the two of us.

However, this document will ALWAYS remain free. Share it with your pre-med friends! We don't want students to feel lost or alone in this process, as studying for the MCAT is a daunting journey. Please share with the link **tiny.cc/may-mcat** and make sure to credit our respective social media accounts.

Finally, your support on May's YouTube channel is always appreciated! There are a lot of other helpful pre-med related videos there.

Special Thanks

(May) Thank you to all the upperclassmen and current medical students who have answered my questions and given me pointers while preparing for the MCAT. This document is a culmination

of not only my experiences, but the advice that has been given to me from other successful MCAT-takers. And a very special thank you to Anuva who went above and beyond to support me during the past few months studying for the MCAT and who helped to write this guide! Don't be afraid to ask friends, classmates, even professors for help and advice as you embark on this journey. They are often excited to share their experiences, advice, and mistakes with you.

You can do this. We are rooting for you. Best of luck!