



Planning for Med Apps

MONTANA HACKETT [MED 2]

An overview of the general components of a medical school application and how to check them off over time



Introduction/Purpose

Like all things in life, knowing what you are building towards can help you design a plan to get there. Knowing your destination and even just generally what the road looks like to get there makes figuring out your individual path much easier.

This article is about giving you a foundational understanding of what you are going to need in your medical school application and strategies to build those over time.

You should note that this article is based off of my personal experience, the experience of my peers that I applied with, and what we did to prepare for medical school applications. You should also keep in mind that there are differences if you apply to International vs. United States vs. Canadian medical schools and that there are differences between medical schools in different provinces and even within the same province (because why make this easy right?!). I am going to focus primarily on the Canadian process (I'll leave the American applications to my colleagues who applied there), but the guiding principles below are pretty applicable to the United States applications as well.

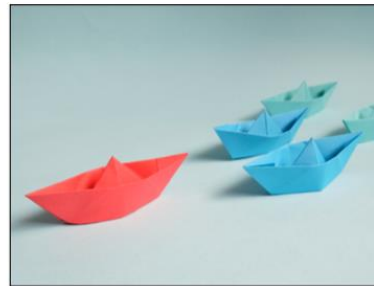
However, do not fear because I am going to go over the parts of the application that are considered universal or at least common to the majority of schools and provide some examples. We can chat more in-depth about each component moving forward in the MMC program. The components include:



GPA



MCAT



Extracurriculars



Research



Letters of Recommendation



Grade Point Average (GPA)



Your GPA is (unfortunately) an incredibly important part of your application. It is seen as either a bar you have to reach for further consideration (i.e. your entire application is only considered if you reach their cutoff) or used competitively (meaning the higher it is the more competitive you are). One important thing to note is that most schools have some leeway in how they assess your GPA. For example, Western/Schulich only assesses your best two years of undergrad, meaning if you are like yours truly and your first year marks were a hot mess then you are ok. Similarly, the University of Toronto will drop one "Full Course Equivalent" for every year of study you have completed with a full course load (i.e if you are applying in fourth year, your bottom three credits will be removed from your GPA calculation). Make sure you check with each school to see what their exceptions are and calculate your GPA based on that to see where you stand.

It is tough to plan to have a good GPA because there are so many things that can happen to make that difficult. We will talk more about study strategies, good practices for course selection, and test prep in future posts but feel free to reach out to us if you have specific questions.

Here is the Ontario Tool for determining your overall GPA; however the formula is often different depending on the country, province, or school you apply to so make sure to check where you stand compared to their GPA requirements: <https://www.ouac.on.ca/guide/omsas-conversion-table/>



MCAT

The Medical College Admissions Test is an ≈8 hour standardized test required by the vast majority of medical schools in North America. It is often considered the gate keeper to medical school and it has four sections which *primarily* cover:

Section 1 - General Chem/Organic Chem/Physics

Section 2 - Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills (aka CARS)

Section 3 - Biology/Cell Bio/Biochemistry/Physiology Section 4 - Psychology/Sociology

This exam is unlike any other you have probably encountered thus far. The question style is unique compared to undergraduate style exams in that you need to understand how to navigate the question style just as well as you need to understand the material. Again, different schools have different ways of assessing your score in their application. Western has a cutoff for each section that you must make or your application is not considered whereas other schools use it competitively to differentiate applicants (some, like Ottawa, do not use it at all but they are few in number).

To prepare there are tons of resources, free and paid, to help you but there is a way to kill two birds with one stone in the form of your selected course work.



If you are in a science undergrad, most of the content on the exam can be covered through your courses so that when it comes time for you to study for the MCAT, you really only need to fill in some knowledge gaps and learn how to approach the CARS section (which is a whole other upcoming article because of how different this section is). Some courses you should consider taking (most of which you probably have to take if you are in science) would be:

Section 1 - General Chem/Organic Chem/Physics

- Two semesters of General Chem (typically a first year introductory course)
- Two semesters of Physics (typically a first year introductory course)
- Two semesters of Organic Chemistry (some argue just the first/organic reactions half is necessary)

Section 3 - Biology/Cell Bio/Biochemistry/Physiology

- Two semesters of Biology
- One semester of Cell Biology
- One semester of Biochemistry (although I found more to be helpful) → Two semesters of Human Physiology

Section 4 - Psychology/Sociology

- Two semesters of Psychology (introductory)
- Two semesters of Sociology (introductory)

Having these courses out finished by the end of 2nd year can provide you with a really solid foundation for 3/4 of the sections of the MCAT meaning you can focus your studying more on learning how to TAKE the exam rather than learning the material for the exam (and focus more on conquering CARS). If you are not in Science or haven't taken all of these courses do not fret! It is not the end of the world by any means. The MCAT is designed to test your will-power, endurance, and critical thinking above all else. The detail you have to understand the science is much less than what undergraduate classes require.

Most people take the MCAT in the summer to avoid studying during the academic year. When you choose to take the MCAT is based on your individual situation. If you need advice feel free to reach out to your mentors!

Finally, do not feel bad if you study for months only to fall short of the score you need. Very few people get the score they need the first time and most take it several times. I studied all summer the first time and fell well short of what I needed. Remember, it may seem like they are only testing your knowledge, but fundamentally the MCAT is designed to prove you are resilient and are willing to work towards your goals. Your mentors are here to help you through it so ask us!

Here is the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) website which outlines the MCAT (they are the creators and administrators of the test): <https://students-residents.aamc.org/applying-medical-school/taking-mcat-exam/prepare-mcat-exam/> . Take an hour and look through what the test consists of and get an idea of what your approach might be.





Extracurriculars (ECs)

Extracurriculars and research are honestly the two parts of your application that you can really set yourself apart with, for good or for bad. More and more, medical admissions teams want people with diverse experiences and your ECs are how you show them that's you. To give you some context, on your application you will be asked to create an autobiographical sketch. This is an entire section (often with specific categories) where you list your non-academic pursuits and research experiences.

For Ontario schools, you can submit a max of 30 independent experiences. Your submission for each includes the title, start/end dates, short description, geographic location, level of education at the time, hours spent on experience, and did it occur in the summer or academic year (or both). The categories for your experiences on the Ontario application (OMSAS) are Employment, Volunteer Activities, Extracurricular Activities, Awards and Accomplishments, Research, and Other. I would suggest creating a log of your experiences based on these categories. That way you can identify where you need more experience versus where you are strong.

Do not feel you have to submit 30 experiences. For example, I only submitted 25 because I felt that those 25 were indicative of who I was and what I valued and adding five more that I felt were not as strong would confuse what type of person I was in my application.

I cannot emphasize enough the value of having work/job experience on your application. A retail or food industry job many seem like something you should exclude but it is so valuable on an application. If you read between the lines, it shows you have built up soft skills that are crucial to a career in medicine and that you had to balance work with everything else on your application giving you a leg up over people who just sit and study all day.

Similarly, volunteer/ECs that are over several years or longer periods of time are always better short duration experiences/positions and moving up into greater leadership roles within an organization also shows the commitment and work ethic admissions teams are looking for.

Future posts will talk about the different types of leadership experience, how to find experiences, networking, and more.



Research

Research experience is a critical part of your application. Medical admissions teams are looking for independent learners who can solve problems using the scientific method. Different schools look at research with different intensity depending on their goals. The University of Toronto for example puts a heavy emphasis on research experience whereas another school may not.

While having publications is awesome to put on your application, there are ways to get value out of a non-published research project. These include university poster presentations, a thesis capstone to your degree and presenting your poster at conferences (look into ones at your school as they are often easy opportunities). If you love research then you are in luck! This section will come easy to you. If you do not (like yours truly) this will be less fun (initially at least!).



There are a few things you need to think about before looking for a research project. First, what programs does your school offer that provide introductory research experiences? Examples would be summer research programs that you apply to. They are an easy way to get research experience, a potential publication, and plenty of the non-publishing opportunities that you can put on your application. At Western, one notable program is the Dean's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (DUROP). You get a \$6000 research scholarship for one summer, wet-lab experience prior to a thesis, and a slew of opportunities to get experiences to put on your application! Look into programs like this as your schools will have them. There will be a future post that outlines some of the provincial/national programs you can apply to but feel free to message us about it in the meantime!



Letters of Recommendation

If you work hard to develop relationships in your research and extracurriculars or even strike up mentorship with a professor or program head, getting high quality letters does not have to be as daunting as it may seem. Typically you will need between 3-5 letters of recommendation for your application and some programs ask for specific types of letters (one on leadership, one on volunteering, one on academic achievement for example). This part of the application can make or break you. If you have a really exceptional letter from someone well respected or well known then it can help springboard you past someone who's application was scored slightly better or on par to yours. A bad one could cause significant problems for you. To give you an idea of how we approached getting letters and how we decided on which ones to use we will create a future post for you outlining the different approaches your mentors took.

Conclusion

The application process may seem daunting, but the point of this program is to help you split it up into manageable chunks. Each part of the application takes time, this isn't something you can rush through. My perspective also comes from what is known as the "traditional path," i.e I took a science degree applied from undergrad as a non-mature student. What you need to keep in mind is that there is no time limit on when you need to get in, there is always another option, always another approach. If you truly want to become a physician then you will find a way to persevere and we will be there to help you do so.

