



What I Wish I Knew Before Studying for the MCAT

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With exams finishing up and May starting, the promise of summer-time freedom hangs in the late spring air. After working hard this entire academic year, it's finally time to kick back and relax. Right?

Well, if you're anything like I was as a premed, you're already starting to think about your MCAT study plan. When I started studying for the MCAT, I remember being overwhelmed by the volume of content to study. I felt clueless about how to study effectively and stay motivated. I did some research on how best to tackle this beast of an exam and created a game plan that I thought was fool proof. Unfortunately, my scores from my first attempt at the MCAT proved that my game plan could have been better. I wrote the MCAT again a few years later with quite a few modifications to try and improve my score. Here are some of the things I changed that I wish I had known about in my first attempt. Hopefully these can help some of you achieve a competitive score on your first time writing the MCAT!

Create a study schedule

Having a study schedule helped me track my progress as I reviewed the content. Seeing how much further I had gotten after each day of dedicated studying also helped me stay motivated. And so, it was important to create a study schedule that was both practical and consistent. Some of the things that helped me were:

- Having a regularly-scheduled session for **revision of material** — whether this is a daily 1-hour session to consolidate some of what you've learnt for the day, or a weekly session to summarise everything from your past week, spend some time on a regular basis for review. I tried to incorporate active learning strategies during my revision sessions, such as doing practice questions and self-testing.



- Scheduling in **practice exam** days throughout my study period — not doing this was one of the biggest mistakes I made during my first attempt. I thought it would be best to save all my practice exams until I had finished studying all the content. This is a poor strategy because it misses the fact that tests can be important learning opportunities that help you pinpoint what you are already excelling at and what you need to study more. The best method that worked for me was scheduling 1 practice exam every 3-4 weeks of studying. I spent one whole day writing a full-length practice exam, then revisiting my practice test with a fresh mind the next day to go over my answers. This last step was crucial in finding gaps in my knowledge and determining study targets for my next bout of studying.
- **Modifying** the study schedule as needed— the study schedule is not set in stone! I was altering my schedule here and there to reflect my progress, as well as the strengths and weaknesses I identified during my regular revision sessions and through practice exams. Being reasonably flexible with my schedule allowed me to stay motivated and on top of what I needed to get better at.
- Scheduling in dedicated time for **breaks** away from the books — I did other activities I enjoy during my breaks — **socialising with friends, playing video games, going to my part-time job** — but I did not study! Depending on your studying style and techniques, you could take a complete rest day each week, or maybe a daily moratorium after 6:00 pm where you don't touch your books. Experiment with what works for you, but make sure to give yourself a break! Studying for the MCAT is hard and you're not going to do yourself any favours by getting burnt out.
- **Avoiding scheduling practice exams in the 1-2 week period before the actual test date** — I knew that writing a practice exam at this point would spike my anxiety, especially if I didn't do that well. It would cause unnecessary stress and probably end up impacting my performance on my actual test date. Instead, I used this time to memorise last-minute things I was really struggling with, reviewing my material, and being kind to myself. I especially did not study the night before the exam; I spent the night relaxing and getting to bed early.

Practice, practice, practice

Doing practice passages and stand-alone questions is just as important as reading the test prep books and taking notes! The first time I was preparing for the MCAT, I did not practice enough with the actual questions and my scores suffered for it. Practicing is especially crucial for the CARS section because there isn't really any content to learn for it! I tried the following changes the second time I wrote the MCAT:

- Doing the **practice questions** in my test prep books on a daily basis — these were a good way to review whatever I learnt that day.
- Spending some time doing **CARS passages daily** — another really big mistake I made was being too lax on practicing CARS. I didn't really practice CARS until the last 2 weeks before my test date the first time I wrote the MCAT. The second time, I did at least a couple passages every day. **Depending on how many months before your actual test date you started studying, you could do anywhere from 2-7 passages daily.** I started by going through the passages in my test prep books using some of their analytic strategies to find what worked for me. Once I started feeling comfortable with the reading comprehension and analytic strategies, I focused on timing myself.



- Finding **online resources** for learning and practicing questions — there are tons of guides and resources available on the internet that can help you find free and paid practice exams and questions. Here are some:
 - Reddit r/MCAT subreddit (contains many links to resources and strategies) — <https://www.reddit.com/r/Mcat/wiki/mcat2015faq>
 - Khan Academy (contains free content review and a lot of practice passages **note that these materials are only available until Sep 2021, this is likely the last cycle you can use them!***) — <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat>
 - AAMC official MCAT practice resources (contains practice full-length exams and question banks, for a price) — <https://store.aamc.org/mcat-prep.html>
- Practicing with the **official AAMC materials** if possible — I know these resources are quite expensive and only add to the extreme cost of studying for and writing the MCAT in general. However, using the official AAMC CARS question banks and the official AAMC full-length practice exams were some of the biggest reasons I was able to go from a 127 to 130 in CARS. Test prep companies' science passages are typically reasonably similar to the actual MCAT, but CARS passages can be a hit or miss. If nothing else, using the CARS question bank can give you an idea of how AAMC builds its passages and questions, and the reasoning behind why one answer is correct. Consider splitting the cost of these materials with a couple of friends to make it more affordable.

Practical advice for exam day

Exam day is stressful enough on its own without having to worry about some of the practical issues of having to sit down for an 8-hour exam. Consider these ideas for exam day and plan accordingly. These are the strategies I tried:

- Familiarising myself with the **test centre location** a few days before the exam.
- Making sure I brought my **ID cards** and everything else I needed to check in — keeping my materials ready to go the night before my exam helped decrease my stress the morning of.
- Eating a nutritious but relatively **light breakfast** — I chose foods that could provide energy for many hours, and that didn't upset my stomach.
- **Avoiding drinking too much caffeine** and other liquids — trust me, from personal experience, you do not want to be stuck needing to use the bathroom in the middle of your CARS section.
- Bringing **nutritious snacks and a lunch** for my breaks
- **Using my breaks!** — I did not skip any of my breaks. I used breaks to eat a few of my snacks, go to the washroom, walk around in the hallway outside the testing room to stretch my legs and gather my wits.
- **Pacing myself** during the exam — both times I wrote my MCAT, I felt exceptionally exhausted by the start of the psych/soc section and found it hard to continue maintaining focus. I believe this was because I did not use my breaks wisely or bring decent foods to eat, and I let anxiety eat me up. Hopefully some combination of the above tips help you deal with this!

The MCAT can be an incredibly stressful hurdle to conquer in the long and tedious process of applying for medical school. However, with enough planning, practicing, and self-care, you can maintain motivation throughout your study period and excel at this exam! Incorporating these ideas for my second time writing the MCAT helped me study much more effectively and perform better on the exam. I hope they can be helpful for you too! **Best of luck and take care of yourself.**

