

Preparing for the MCAT FAQ

When should I take the MCAT?

Medical school admission officers usually suggest that you take the test in the calendar year prior to the year in which you plan to enter medical school. They generally recommend a Spring testing date because receipt of the Spring scores allows for summer or early fall completion of your application. A Spring test date is also recommended because it permits examinees who feel that their scores do not accurately reflect their abilities to retest in the Summer of Fall. Later scores may then be submitted to medical schools in the same application year as the earlier scores.

What are MCAT questions like?

The MCAT tests general knowledge and knowledge of specific subjects: biology, chemistry, and physics as well as communication and critical thinking skills.

The Physical and Biological Sciences sections contain multiple-choice questions. Most of the questions accompany brief informational passages; a smaller number are independent of any passage and of each other. Questions assess knowledge of basic concepts in biology, chemistry, and physics through their application to the solution of science problems.

The Verbal Reasoning section contains multiple-choice questions based on reading selections from the social and natural sciences and the humanities. The section will assess your ability to comprehend, reason, and think critically. Subject-matter knowledge in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences will not be tested.

The Writing Sample consists of two items, each composed of a brief topic statement and a set of writing tasks designed to elicit a unified, coherent, first-draft essay exploring the meaning and implications of the statement.

For detailed information on each test section, read [Preparing for the MCAT Exam](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/mcatessentials.pdf) (<http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/mcatessentials.pdf>).

How is the MCAT scored?

Four separate scores are derived from the MCAT, one for each section. These four scores are reported to you, to the medical schools you designate, and, with your permission, to your undergraduate advisor.

Each score that you achieve on the multiple-choice sections (Physical Sciences, Verbal Reasoning, and Biological Sciences) is based on the number of questions you answer correctly. This raw score is a reflection of your correct answers only. This means that a wrong answer will be scored exactly the same as an unanswered question; there is no additional penalty for wrong answers. Therefore, even if you are unsure of the correct answer to a question, you should make your best guess.

Your raw score on the Writing Sample is determined by adding the scores you receive on each of the two responses you write. Because two different readers rate each response, your total raw Writing score is the sum of the four scores: two for the first response and two for the second. The scores for the multiple-choice sections—Verbal Reasoning, Physical Sciences, and Biological Sciences—will be reported on a scale ranging from 1 (lowest) to 15 (highest). The raw score you receive on each section is converted to a score on this 15-point scale. For example, if your raw score on one of the sections is between 40 and 43, your converted score might be 11. Scores ranging from 44 to 46 might have a converted score of 12, and so forth.

Your raw score on the Writing sample will be converted to an alphabetic scale ranging from J (lowest) to T (highest). Each letter represents the sum of two scores on the two Writing Sample items. The sum can result from different combinations of individual scores. (Individual scores are assigned along a 6-point scale.) For example, a student whose scores are 4 and 5 on the first item and 4 and 4 on the second—a raw score of 17—would receive the same alphabetic score point as student who scored a 3 and 3 on the first items and a 5 and 6 on the second.

In addition to scores for the individual sections, a total score will also be reported. This total score will consist of a combined multiple-choice score conjoined with the Writing Sample score, e.g., 42T.

Why are raw scores converted to scaled scores?

The conversion of raw scores to scaled scores compensates for small variations in difficulty between sets of questions. The exact conversion of raw to scaled scores is not constant; because different sets of questions are used on different test dates.

Conversion of your raw scores to the 15-point scale also helps minimize variability in test scores due to factors unrelated to your skill or knowledge. Variability in scores may be due to such external factors as state of health or degree of familiarity with standardized testing. The 15-point scale tends to provide a more stable and accurate assessment of a student's abilities. Two students of equal ability would be expected to get the same scaled score, even though there might be a slight difference between the raw scores each student obtained on the test.

Scaled scores on the MCAT can be interpreted as percentile rank ranges based on the performance of all students taking the test during a given administration or in a given year. The percentages of students achieving each scaled score vary somewhat from one administration to another. Interpretive information—scaled score means and standard deviations for each area of assessment, percentages of students achieving each scaled score, and percentile rank ranges—will be provided with your score report so that you may compare your performance to that of other students.

Am I ready to take the MCAT?

You may have taken the SAT or ACT as part of the college application process. The MCAT is different from these tests in that it goes beyond testing general knowledge. The MCAT also tests knowledge of specific subjects: biology, chemistry, and physics; it also assesses communication and critical thinking skills.

Ideally, your undergraduate education has prepared you for the MCAT. If you have taken the requisite science courses, as well as classes in the humanities and social sciences you should be skilled at reading a wide range of material. Rigorous coursework and extracurricular reading expand your vocabulary, develop your reading pace, and increase your familiarity with texts and arguments in various disciplines.

If you have already completed an undergraduate program, but need to take more science courses to meet medical school admissions requirements, you should explore [Postbaccalaureate Premedical Programs](http://services.aamc.org/postbac/) (<http://services.aamc.org/postbac/>).

Do I need to take a commercial review course?

Hoping to improve their scores, some students enroll in MCAT prep courses offered by commercial firms. The material here, along with a rigorous undergraduate education, should make enrollment in such courses unnecessary. Some review courses imply that they will give their students the opportunity to see and study questions that may appear on the MCAT. We make strenuous efforts to ensure that this is not the case.

One study involving over 20,000 students during a five-year period compared the MCAT performance of those who had enrolled in commercial review courses with that of those who had not. The study results indicated that gains derived from commercial review courses are small. The small differences in the scores of individuals who received such coaching could be due simply to the time devoted to reviewing the relevant material.

How do I create a study plan?

While there is no one way to prepare for the MCAT, your study plan should begin at least three months before your chosen exam date. Here's an outline you might want to revise to fit your situation:

- Read and understand the [MCAT Essentials](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/mcatessentials.pdf) (PDF, 24 pages)
 - <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/mcatessentials.pdf>
- Read the Test Sections at [Preparing for the MCAT Exam](http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/preparing/start.htm)
 - <http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/preparing/start.htm>
- Make a note of any material that is unfamiliar to you or that you haven't studied recently
- Review the science topics using relevant course materials, including textbooks, course outlines, and notes
- Work through MCAT practice tests and identify topics and skills that need additional review
- If your pace on the practice tests is slow, take advantage of any services your college offers to help improve reading speed and comprehension
- If you have a study partner, each of you can use your strengths to help the other address areas of weakness
- Avoid last-minute "cramming"
- Make sure to get enough sleep, food, and exercise, especially in the days preceding the test