

A Beginner's Guide to the MCAT

By: The Education Team at WebStraw



Introduction

Hi! Thank you for checking out this MCAT resource by WebStraw at Western University! In this document, the MCAT team at WebStraw has compiled their tips and tricks for how to succeed on the MCAT. It is designed to provide future MCAT-takers with information on how to utilize the available resources for the MCAT, how to approach the CARS section, and some frequently asked questions.

How to use this resource: We recommend using the resource to supplement other resources that you may have to make well-informed choices on how to approach the MCAT.

We wish you the best of luck in your studies!

Disclaimer: This resource is meant as a supplementary (non-comprehensive) resource written by students for other students. These are anecdotes from select students and may not be generalizable to every student's MCAT experience.

Stay up to date with what WebStraw has to offer. This resource was made by the resource design team at WebStraw. We are a student operated non-profit organization dedicated to providing open-access, high quality educational resources to university students.

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Getting Started

Understanding the MCAT

The most important aspect about understanding and ensuring your success on the MCAT is to familiarize yourself with the [r/mcat](#) and [r/premed](#) subreddits. Both of these subreddits have amazing resources and testimonials from hundreds of high-scoring users and are also filled with very encouraging and positive folks. Aside from those subreddits, this resource should give you everything you need to know about the MCAT to do well.

Scheduling your MCAT

After you familiarize yourself with this community, it is important that you schedule a day for your MCAT that works well for you. Many students choose a date towards the end of summer (in August), but you should consider leaving 1-3 weeks between your test date and the beginning of school to let yourself recover and rest before the academic year. Additionally, since spots fill up fast, it is imperative that you search for the opening date for scheduling an exam to ensure you get your preferred time and location. . Morning MCATs are more optimal since you do not have to stress about the exam for multiple hours leading up to it, as you might for an afternoon MCAT. Another final tip for scheduling your MCAT is to schedule your exam for a weekend. Weekends work best since many students work or volunteer during the week, and more importantly, it also allows you to write the MCAT at the same time and day as you would write practice exams.

Making a study schedule

Make sure that you not only create a study schedule for the MCAT, but also set aside time for recreation/vacations and any other commitments you may have over the summer! ! Generally, it is a good idea to have $\frac{1}{3}$ of your study time be dedicated towards content review and the other $\frac{2}{3}$ towards practice. This is longitudinal, where you would do for example, 1 month of content review then 2 months of practice. Content review can continue into the second stage, but only really when you forget something, or if you include your daily anki cards. Depending on your previous course history, studying for the MCAT should take somewhere between 200 to 500 hours. Your entire study schedule should begin with a practice exam (either half or full-length) and end with the real exam.

Third Party Resources

There are plenty of resources aside from the AAMC that are available for you to utilize. In this section, we will briefly go over a few resources that we and many other previous MCAT-takers found useful.

Anki

Anki is a free flashcard program that uses spaced repetition to help the user memorize facts and concepts. This resource can be helpful in covering knowledge gaps for the science-based sections, especially if you come from a non-science academic background. With Anki, you have the option to either make your own decks or use a pre-made deck. Although making your own deck can be time-consuming and requires a solid understanding of how the program functions to optimize your cards, it enables you to have total control over what content is in your deck. On the other hand, while you will have less control over the concepts that appear in pre-made decks, you will not have to go through the trouble of creating your own cards. Premade Anki decks previous MCAT-takers recommended included *Premed95* and *MileDown*, both of which can be found through the r/MCAT page on Reddit.

Khan Academy

Khan Academy is an open-access resource that includes content review videos and practice passages for each section. The content review videos are an excellent alternative to buying review books, especially if you prefer to learn from videos rather than textbooks. Previous MCAT takers have also noted that the practice CARS passages are a good alternative to other 3rd party CARS books such as Examcrackers and The Princeton Review. However, keep in mind that at the time of writing (June 2021), Khan Academy is planning to remove their MCAT resources from their website by September 2021. These videos will still be available on Youtube and Google Drive; click [here](#) for more information.

UWORLD

UWORLD is a 3rd party resource package available for purchase at around \$300 CAD. Their packages include hundreds of practice passages for each section, which is often enough to fill 1-2 months of practice. This package also comes with the ability to construct your own practice section test or full-length exam with the practice passages provided, making it quite useful and versatile.

The CARS Section

Understanding the CARS Section

The Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills section, also known as “CARS” for short, is the second section you will encounter during the MCAT. This section consists of 9 text-based passages in 90 minutes, with 5-7 questions per passage. CARS passages cover a plethora of disciplines, ranging from the visual arts to social sciences and humanities. The only major discipline that is not covered in CARS is the natural sciences. In Canada, some medical schools such as McMaster, Calgary and Western place special emphasis on the CARS section score. This means they may use the CARS score competitively or have a higher cutoff for “out of province” applicants.

Questions in the CARS section assess 3 skills: comprehension of the passage, ability to reason within the text, and ability to reason beyond the text.

1. Skill 1: Comprehension of the Passage

- a. These are comprehension questions that test your understanding of broad or specific details from the passage.
- b. Example: “What is the main idea of this passage?”. These questions essentially assess if you understood the passage the exam writers want you to.

2. Skill 2: Reasoning within the Text

- a. Reasoning within the text questions require you to draw unstated conclusions from the passage by piecing together evidence from within the passage. These questions require some extent of logical reasoning and ability to synthesize ideas using passage evidence.
- b. Example: “Which piece of evidence, if removed, would least undermine the main arguments of the author?”.

3. Skill 3: Reasoning Beyond the Text

- a. Reasoning beyond the text questions introduce new information and asks you to relate that new information to the passage.
- b. Example: “How would the author respond to statement XYZ if they were asked this in an interview?”.

Tips for approaching CARS

There are two main skill areas that most people can work on to improve their CARS score: Reading the passage and doing the questions. In this section, we will go over a few tips and tricks that can get you started on improving your reading and question answering skills for CARS.

Skill Area 1: Reading the Passage

Developing good passage reading skills is critical to building a strong foundation for understanding the passage and answering the questions.

1. Tip 1: Actively Search for main idea of the passage
 - a. When reading, it can be helpful to actively search for the main idea of the passage. The main idea generally cannot be found in a specific sentence, rather, it is something that is pieced together using several different ideas from the passage. Almost every CARS passage will ask about its main idea in some way or another, so make sure you can identify it after one read-through!
2. Tip 2: Putting Pen to Paper
 - a. Another technique that can improve passage reading is putting pen to paper. This technique ensures that you are actively reading the passage and understanding the arguments that are presented. However, it is important to not annotate everything, as it can leave you with less time to answer the questions. Try your best to find a good balance while doing practice passages!

Skill Area 2: Doing the Questions

1. Tip 1: Remove any background knowledge / personal opinion
 - a. When doing the passage questions, it is crucial to remove any background knowledge and personal opinions you may have regarding the topic. CARS questions are intended to be answered by using only the passage information; any information not mentioned in the passage may mislead you from the correct answer. In whichever ways work best for you, do your best to approach each passage and its associated questions with a blank slate.
 - b. It can be helpful to ask yourself, “can my answer choice be justified by evidence from the passage ONLY?” This checks if you unintentionally inserted background information into your train of thought.
2. Tip 2: Process of Elimination
 - a. Another technique previous MCAT takers found helpful was to use the process of elimination (POE). In CARS, the correct answer often does not stand out and has more of a neutral stance. Because of this, it is usually difficult to identify the correct answer outright. Therefore, using POE to identify flaws in the other answer options can be an easier approach to CARS.
 - b. When reading over an answer, try to look for any flaws in its wording or logic. Once you are able to identify a flaw, cross the answer out and try not to consider the answer option again unless you cannot find a better answer.

Preparing for CARS

Since the AAMC does not expect MCAT-takers to learn any “content” for CARS (unlike the B/B, P/S and C/P sections), you can jump right into practice passages. If you’ve identified that CARS is a section you need to improve on, it can be beneficial to start doing practice passages early on! For the first few passages, it can be helpful to start untimed and take your time to get used to actively reading a passage and doing its questions. As you feel more comfortable and score better, you can add a timer or do more passages in a row. The amount of passages you do in a day will vary from person to person and also depends on the stage of your CARS study schedule. For example, you can start with 3 passages every weekday and work up to doing 6-7 passages every weekday towards the end of your studying. Make sure to slowly progress the intensity and duration of your CARS practice session to ensure steady improvement, just like how you would progress a workout at the gym.

At the beginning of your CARS practice, most MCAT takers recommended utilizing 3rd party resources such as [Jack Westin](#), [Khan Academy](#), [ExamCrackers 101 Passages](#) and [The Princeton Review Hyperlearning CARS](#). As you get closer to test day, you can start doing the AAMC CARS resources for practice. Since the AAMC CARS resources are the most representative of the actual MCAT, using this practice in the last weeks and days will optimize your logical reasoning style for test day.

Remember that these are just a few tips that the WebStraw team found helpful in approaching CARS passages and questions. There are numerous other approaches for CARS that work just as well, so make sure to try out a few different approaches and use the one that works best for you!

Full Length Exams (FLs)

Available FL Resources

There are many full lengths out there that you can get for FREE from third party sources, do not pay for them because they are not that great! They’re only really good for content review and practising the timing of the test and getting into the right mindset. Here is a google doc from reddit with instructions to access nearly [fifteen third party full lengths](#).

Be aware that there is absolutely no need to do that many. Around 3-5 of these third party FLs are enough before you really get into it with the AAMC FLs that are available. There are five AAMC FLs available: one is free and unscored, and the other four come as part of the AAMC official package or you can buy them individually. These are the FLs that will give you a much more accurate score than the third party FLs. Don’t feel down by your 3rd party FL scores,

as many people score below 500 on third party FLs and will do 10 to 20 points better on the AAMC FLs.

To get into the mindset, it is recommended that you do the FLs as if you were writing the real exam. Pretend like it is the real thing and wake up at the time you would have to get to the exam centre, start at the exact time, and take the recommended breaks.

Reviewing FLs

Reviewing your full length exams is just as important as writing them. Most students suggest reviewing exams the day after so it is still fresh in your mind, but you are in a fresher headspace to understand your mistakes. Here is an [example spreadsheet](#) you can use to track your mistakes.

As you review the exam, try to recall and write down your approach to the question. Then, note down the correct answer alongside the reasoning provided. The AAMC solutions are quite detailed and it's important that you understand why your answer is wrong, and why the right answer is correct. It's also important to realize why you made the mistake; maybe your content knowledge is weak or you misinterpreted the question. Analyzing the question, your approach, and any underlying weaknesses will help you avoid similar mistakes in the future.

AAMC Resources

Overview of the AAMC Package

For \$294 USD, you can purchase the entire AAMC package from the AAMC online store. You can also check out the other packages available [here](#).

The following are included in the package:

- Practice Exams
 - There are four full length practise exams included. The AAMC full length exams are most similar to the level of difficulty you can expect on your exam day and they will also be most predictive of your score.
- Section Bank
 - There are three hundred total questions with 100 of these dedicated to the BB section, 100 dedicated to CP and the last 100 dedicated to PS. It consists of a mix of passage-type questions and discrete questions.
- Question Pack

- There are six different question packs and each one has 120 questions. Two of the question packs are for biology, one for chemistry, two for CARS and one for physics. It consists of a mix of passage-type questions and discrete questions.
- CARS Diagnostic Tool
 - This is a new resource with 28 CARS passages and video walkthroughs of how to approach a CARS package.
- Online Flashcards
 - There are 150 discrete questions. Twenty five for biology, another 25 for biochemistry, 25 for chemistry, 25 for physics, 25 for psychology and another 25 for sociology.

Using the AAMC resources for practise

Flashcards and Diagnostic Tools: It might be a good idea to start with the flashcards and the diagnostic tools. The diagnostic tool helps you understand how the CARS section works, and tells you where you currently are alongside what improvements you need to make. The flashcards are also quite easy so it is a good tool to see how well you know the science material.

Question packs and Section bank: The question packs and section bank are two great resources that can be used in a variety of ways. One suggestion is to restructure the CARS question packs and section banks into full lengths. You can do this by doing the first half of every section bank in the order they would appear on the MCAT (CP > CARS > BB > PS).

The most important thing however, is that you always review the question packs and section banks after you are done. There are lots of ways to review them, but a lot of students have found the spreadsheet method that we mentioned earlier as the best way to review questions.

Many people suggest practising the full lengths under exam conditions with the exact timing you would expect at an exam centre. It's also recommended that you begin the exam at the same time as the real exam's start time, and prepare the same meals you expect to take with you on the day of. Reviewing full lengths is also very important and you can find our recommendations in an earlier section of this pamphlet. The AAMC full length exams are most similar to the level of difficulty you can expect on your exam day and they will also be most predictive of your score.

Mental Health during the MCAT

The MCAT is unlike any other university exam as most people prepare months in advance, making it a marathon rather than a sprint. Therefore, it is critical to surround yourself with a proper support system and to implement strategies to ward off burnout. One way to avoid burnout is by giving yourself rest days in your study schedule. Make sure to take a few days off from studying each week, or limit the number of hours you study each day. Studying for several months straight can become repetitive, so taking breaks prevents things from becoming monotonous. Another way to maintain proper mental health during the grind is to have a group of friends that you can reliably socialize with. Numerous studies have shown the benefits of socialization on not only mental health, but also cognitive performance, so make sure to set aside a few hours each week to catch up with your friends about MCAT and non-MCAT related things!

If you or someone else are seeking additional mental health resources in Canada, please check out this [link](#). For mental health resources at Western University, click [here](#).

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1) “How long are a high scorer's content review and practice periods?”

A) I scored a 524 (132/130/131/131) and my content review period was about 1.5-2 months and consisted of me making Anki decks/cards based on the 92 page Miledown review sheets and the 86 page P/S document. I did my Anki cards everyday until the day of my exam but this period of 2 months was where I made all the cards (with the exception of cards I made when I got a question wrong). The practice period was about 1.5 months and consisted of me doing my Anki everyday and then working on the AAMC content and FLs. If I could go back, I would make this period longer because UWorld is apparently an amazing resource and I just neglected to do it because I was lazy and didn't feel like I had the time.

Q2) “How should you plan to do the full-length tests?”

A) My exam fell on a saturday so I decided that I would do FLs only on saturdays and at the proper time of my actual exam. I did take the month of June off because I went on vacation, but every Saturday other than in June I wrote an FL. This meant waking up at like 6 or whatever and mentally preparing myself then writing until the ending time of 3 (I forget how long it was, but I started when I was supposed to and ended when I was supposed to and took all of my breaks). Unfortunately, this meant my fridays were kinda wasted cause I couldn't go out, but it left Saturday nights open. After writing the full-lengths I would take the rest of the day off (after doing my cards) and then review the

test in its entirety on the Sunday. Always review the full-length on a different day than when you write it. You will be in a different headspace and can see why you really got a question right/wrong. Also, if you get a question right for the wrong reason, it's wrong and you should make a card for it.

Q3) "I know some people say the books are bad, but if you had to recommend one brand, which one would be the best?"

A) The ExamCracker books are really good and their CARS workbook is really helpful. I bought it off a friend and never used it though so I cannot say for sure. That being said, they look pretty good when I rifle through them, it's just I think it's a waste of time and money to use these books over free resources like the Miledown document.

Q4) How important is the MCAT? Should I even care about my overall score, or just CARS?

A) This is a really tough question to answer for a few reasons. First of all, the value placed upon the MCAT is not consistent between the US and Canada, or even between schools within each country. Some schools really care, while others only care about one section, or not at all. Secondly, the value placed upon the MCAT seems to be decreasing in recent years, particularly in Canada. In general, the MCAT is an essential component of your application, particularly in the US. At US schools, GPA and MCAT are king, followed by extracurriculars. In addition, most of these schools do not have particular preferences for your individual sections, but rather your overall score. However, in Canada, there aren't really any schools that care about your overall score (aside from Saskatchewan and Manitoba). For most schools, they have cutoff scores (either for individual sections or overall), or they strictly prioritize CARS. Thus, in Canada, it can actually be a reasonable strategy to only prioritize your CARS score. That being said, it's not recommended to put all of your eggs in one basket, so it is a much safer option to try your best on all sections. You're gonna be putting in effort either way, so you might as well go all in and give it your best shot.