The primary function of the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) is to determine how a prospective medical student will perform in medical school. In that way, it doesn’t differ significantly from standardized tests, such as the American College Test (ACT) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), that high school students take as part of their college admission portfolio.

The MCAT, however, is a totally different animal than any other exam a student has taken to date.

“While the SAT and ACT exams test the reading, writing, and quantitative skills that students need for success in undergraduate education, the MCAT exam tests the natural, behavioral, and social sciences knowledge and analysis skills that students need for success in medical school,” said Karen Mitchell, PhD, senior director of admissions testing service for the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

Petros Minasi, senior director of pre-health programs at Kaplan Test Prep, offered further insight on how the MCAT differs from other standardized tests. Having begun his career at Kaplan working on SAT prep, Minasi was able to offer unique insight. Here’s a look at the ways in which he felt the exam stood alone in its rigors.

**It’s a marathon**

With a total exam day test time of seven hours and 30 minutes, the MCAT is more than twice as long as the ACT or SAT. That doesn’t even factor in the prep. Students spend on average about 240 hours preparing for the exam, according to the AAMC. That number dwarfs even the more ambitious college-entrance exam prep schedules.

Minasi recommends that students spend 300-plus hours of prep time and spread it out over three to five months.
“Since so much of the content in the science portions is sequential, you have to learn one thing before you learn the next thing,” he said. “You can’t just turn around and say tomorrow I’m going to over this topic, when there’s 15 topics that you have needed to cover before going over that one topic.”

Exam format

The MCAT is broken into four sections: biological and biochemical foundations of living systems; chemical and physical foundations of biological systems; psychological, social, and biological foundations of behavior; and critical analysis and reasoning skills. The first three of those sections are largely passage-based, meaning students have to understand the context surrounding a question in addition to recalling content they have learned in their preparation.

“On the test itself, because these are of varying difficulty, you might have a question that is super short but requires three or four steps to get to the answer,” Minasi said. “You may have another question that appears to be longer, but it’s actually a simple answer. The skill of triage really comes into play for MCAT test takers where you say, ‘I’m going to come back to that question,’ but let me go get those easy ones first.”

Required knowledge

The MCAT is a content-based exam, meaning that test-takers are expected to know specific bodies of information prior to taking it. That is largely different from college admissions exams, which generally test concepts students learn throughout their scholastic careers. And then there is the vast amount of content one’s expected to master for the MCAT.

“It’s a year’s worth of organic chemistry, a year’s worth of general chemistry, a year’s worth of physics, a year’s worth of general biology, a semester’s worth of upper division biochemistry, and topics from introductory psychology and sociology—there’s simply a lot of content that’s coming into play, and the big mistake is students think it’s the exact same skill,” Minasi said.

If students think that because they did well on the college-admissions testing that they will “breeze through the MCAT,” then that means “there’s much more that they need to be focusing on,” he added.
The medium is different

The MCAT is a computer-based exam. Even though most students are very fluent with technology, that does mean there is one more thing they need to strategize for.

“We’re not used to taking tests on computers for the most part,” Minasi said. “It’s a very different testing experience.

“It’s an additional set of skills to know how to leverage the digital format to their advantage. You can’t cross something out with your pencil. You have your scratch paper and there are highlighting functions a student can use. It’s an additional layer of thinking and preparation they need to account for.”