Designing your MCAT prep program? Follow these 6 steps

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When preparing for the Medical Colleges Admission Test, experts recommend studying for somewhere between 300–350 hours. The hours you log are one thing; how you log them is another.

Petros Minasi is senior director of prehealth programs at Kaplan Test Prep. As a veteran MCAT prep instructor, he offered a six-step plan to help students build the ideal program to maximize their score on one of the most important aspects of a medical school application.

Medicine can be a career that is both challenging and highly rewarding, but figuring out a medical school’s prerequisites and navigating the application process can be a challenge unto itself. The AMA premed glossary guide has the answers to frequently asked questions about medical school, the application process, the MCAT and more.

Plan to take the test

The MCAT is offered about 30 times a year with test dates ranging from January to September. You are going to want to take the exam in the calendar year before you plan to enter medical school. Exam dates do fill up, Minasi says, so don’t delay if you have a date in mind.

Learn more from the AMA about why the MCAT is not just another standardized exam.

Take a diagnostic exam

To begin preparing for the MCAT, it’s vital to have a baseline of where you stand. If you take a class as part of your preparation, the instructor will likely give you a practice test at the outset. If you are studying on your own, you can find practice tests through a number of online resources. Kaplan, for example, offers a guide on how to study for the MCAT in six months.
That assessment should give you an idea about your strengths and weaknesses, and where they fall relative to the MCAT’s 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, also known as CARS.

"You’re going to want to see your breakdown as far as individual sections are concerned, but you’re going to want to get it in terms of individual topics," Minasi said. "The way the MCAT is set up as an exam, especially the two natural science sections, [biological and biochemical foundations of living systems and chemical and physical foundations of biological systems], those sections have content areas that cross-pollinate between them."

Get some great advice from the AMA on how to master the MCAT’s CARS section.

**Build a study calendar**

Once you know where your focus should be, it is time build an MCAT study plan.

As part of that process, Minasi recommends that students account for all their personal and professional obligations and also plan to take a day off a week to avoid burnout. For a student testing about three months out, the average day of studying should be around three hours.

**Practice with purpose**

Exceling on the MCAT requires persistence and your study schedule is no different. It should account for knowledge gaps and be as specific as possible.

"A student could very easily study for the MCAT for three hours every Monday," Minasi said. "The student needs to be realistic and targeted as far as what they are going to be studying. What do you want to be accomplishing? You also need to be specific about the work you are going to be doing. You should say what you are doing with each hour."

In addition to reviewing material, Minasi believes doing practice questions and analyzing those you answer incorrectly will be a good use of time at this stage of studying.

Learn more about why persistence and patience can pay off in MCAT preparation.
Section testing

Once you feel confident about where you stand on each section, you should begin taking simulated exams one section at a time. Take a section one day and spend the following day reviewing it.

"After you’ve been doing some work, you need to assess yourself again in a simulated fashion," Minasi said. "When you see how you perform on an entire section, you go through the review process. That means you are looking at yourself and adjusting the game plan. It’s a constant game of refinement. See what you got wrong and what you can do differently next time you take the exam. On the stuff you get right, what did you do correctly that you could be replicating on questions you got wrong?"

Final simulations

About halfway through your studying, it’s wise to take another full length exam to gain an understanding of improvements and remaining weaknesses. After that, during the last month of your studying you are, ideally, in a place where you are comfortable taking one full-length practice exam per week. Like you did with the individual section exams, you should tweak your studying to address remaining weaknesses.

As you are closing in on exam day, the simulated exams should be at the same time and day of the week as the actual exam. Your studying should conclude a day or two before you take the actual exam.

If you have prepared effectively, Minasi says that "when you go take the actual exam, it shouldn’t feel any different than when took your practice exams."

Have peace of mind and get everything you need to start med school off strong with the AMA.