

Frequently Asked Questions About the MCAT

When should I take the MCAT?

A good time is April, just after you've finished your junior year. Some people take it a year earlier if they have finished the requisite courses in biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, and physics. If you mess up in the April exam, you can take the August exam. However, some applicants have experienced delays in the processing of their applications when they took the August exam.

For the same amount of preparation, would I score higher if I took the MCAT in April since for the August test examinees have all summer to prepare?

The AAMC goes to great lengths to ensure that the date when you take the exam has no effect on your final scores.

John Hackett, Associate Director for MCAT Operations, AAMC, responded to my enquiry concerning this as follows.

"Performance on one test form, during one administration, can be compared validly with performance on another test form taken at a different administration. We accomplish this by using classical equating theory from the field of psychometrics.

Test forms may be used in subsequent administrations. That's one reason for the strict security measures we employ. In each administration, a random sample of examinees, of sufficient size, will be administered test forms previously administered in an August administration, and another random group will be tested with test forms administered in an April administration.

Most repeaters are those who did not perform as well as they thought they should. However, our studies of repeater performance show that there is only a slight score gain for repeaters on the whole. This indicates that the test is reliable.

A much larger number of August examinees are repeaters compared to April examinees. As a result, the mean raw scores for August test-takers are lower than for April test-takers. Therefore, in scaling the scores, this is taken into account."

Would courses in physiology, genetics, etc. help me?

According to the AAMC, such courses are unnecessary for the MCAT. In my opinion, they are somewhat helpful even if all they do is help you understand the questions more quickly. My advice is take them if they are also useful for the degree you are pursuing.

Would a speed reading course help me in the verbal reasoning section?

Most, if not all, courses and books on speed reading teach very little about how to read rapidly; rather, they mostly teach methods of skimming. Although skimming is a useful skill, by itself it is insufficient for success on the comprehension sections of most standardized tests. For this, you must comprehend each passage well. You must actually *read* fast. ([References.](#))

Do you have any suggestions on how to prepare for the verbal reasoning section?

People who really enjoy reading seem to do better than others on the VR section since they tend to have had much more practice at this skill. The more you read, the better you will get at reading. So you can prepare by reading a lot. And even better than this is to read articles similar to those that appear on the MCAT, e.g. NY Times Op/Ed section, The Economist, etc. But even this is like learning to play tennis without a ball. You would do better by completing practice MCAT (or GRE, LSAT, etc.) passages. First, just try to get the right answers, then try to work within the time constraints.

How important is the MCAT in the admissions process?

At most U.S. schools, the MCAT is given as much weight as the GPA. Moreover, if there is a discrepancy between an individual's MCAT scores and his GPA, the tendency is to give the MCAT scores more weight.

In Canada, most schools do not weight the MCAT very highly (e.g. 10% weighting at some schools). Some schools do not give it a weight at all and only use it to screen out applicants at the initial stages by using cut-offs (e.g. the cut-offs at Queens University in 1997 were VR-10, PS-9, WS-N, BS-9, Sum \geq 30).

What are good MCAT scores?

At most schools, a composite score of 30 or higher combined with a GPA of 3.5 or higher is very competitive. Also, "balanced" scores (e.g. 10, 10, 10) are more desirable than "lopsided" scores (e.g. 5, 13, 12).

How long are MCAT scores valid?

Typically medical schools require MCAT scores that will not be more than three years old at the time of matriculation.

Will I be penalized if I take the MCAT many times?

Aim to take the MCAT only once by thoroughly preparing. However, if you scored poorly the first time and repeated the test and did well, most schools will disregard your previous scores. However, taking the test more than two or three times in a three-year period may raise some concerns and hinder your application.

How do medical schools use the WS scores?

Of the four MCAT scores, the WS score is usually the least important. Some schools almost disregard it and assess an applicant's writing ability from his AMCAS personal statement. A number of Canadian schools have a WS cut-off, below which an applicant would be automatically rejected. The University of Manitoba actually assigns a numerical value to the WS score and incorporates this into the calculation of the average score.

How do the courses offered by Kaplan and The Princeton Review compare?

Based on what I've heard from only a few people who have taken both courses, Kaplan has much more practice material, while TPR's Hyperlearning exams are closer to the real test. TPR emphasizes understanding and reasoning, while Kaplan focuses more on memorization (you may not need some of the material).

Will I do better on the MCAT if I take a prep course?

The AAMC reports that examinees who took prep courses did only slightly better than those who did not. A prep course may help if you lack the discipline for self-study. Otherwise, I think expensive prep courses are not the best use of one's financial resources.