How to prepare for the MCAT

A free guide from Harris Academia

4 sections, 230 questions, 6 hours 15 minutes in the chair. This is how preparation actually goes, what it costs when it goes wrong, and what to do about it. Nothing here is behind a paywall.

What you are actually sitting

The exam is 4 sections, 230 questions, and 375 minutes of testing — about 6 hours 15 minutes in the chair once breaks are counted. That length is the first thing to take seriously. Most people who are disappointed by a score were not short of knowledge at question 20; they were short of attention at question 200.

Each section is scored from 118 to 132, and the four add to a total between 472 and 528. 125 per section is the middle of the scale. Because the sections carry equal weight, the cheapest points available to most people are in their worst section, not their best — an extra two points in the section you dislike is worth exactly as much as two in the one you enjoy, and is usually far easier to find.

Section	Questions	Minutes	Per question
Chemistry/Physics	59	95	97s
CARS	53	90	102s
Biology/Biochemistry	59	95	97s
Psychology/Sociology	59	95	97s

> The full-lengths at harrisacademia.com run at this length — 9 of them, 2,070 questions between them — so the 6 hours 15 minutes is something you have sat through before rather than something you are estimating.

How long preparation takes

Three to six months of consistent work is the usual range, and the word doing the work in that sentence is consistent. Twelve focused hours a week for four months beats thirty-five hours a week for six weeks, because the exam rewards recall of material learned a long time ago, and cramming produces the opposite of that.

Plan backwards from the test date rather than forwards from today. Decide when you are sitting it, reserve the final four weeks for full-length exams and review, reserve the two weeks before those for your weakest section, and let content review have whatever remains. If what remains is not enough, the answer is a later test date, not a faster pass through the content.

Write the plan down as weeks, not as topics. A plan that says "finish biochemistry" has no failure condition; a plan that says "biochemistry by the 14th" tells you on the 14th whether you are behind.

> The course at harrisacademia.com is laid out across the 34 content categories, so a week-by-week plan is a list you tick off rather than a guess at how much is left.

The mistake nearly everyone makes

Content review feels like progress and is the easiest part of preparation to overdo. Reading a chapter, highlighting it, and making a clean set of notes produces a strong sense of having worked and very little ability to answer a question about it under time pressure. Recognizing a fact on a page is a different skill from retrieving it without the page in front of you.

The fix is to make retrieval the default activity. Finish a topic, close the book, and write down what you remember before checking. Do questions on a topic the day you learn it even though you will do badly, because doing badly on a topic you just read is information and doing well on a topic you read three weeks ago is proof.

A reasonable ratio after the first few weeks is about a third of your time on new content and two thirds on questions and review of questions. Most people invert that and wonder why their practice scores stall.

> If the obstacle is simply not having enough to attempt, harrisacademia.com carries 1,600 section-practice questions alongside the question bank — roughly 3,886 questions in all. Volume will not learn the material for you; it is what turns reading it into retrieving it.

How to review a question you got wrong

This is the single highest-value habit in MCAT preparation and the one most often done badly. Reading the explanation, nodding, and moving on is not review; it is reading. The goal is to find out why you chose what you chose, which the explanation cannot tell you.

For every question you miss, answer three things in writing. First: what did I think the question was asking? Second: what made the wrong answer attractive — a fact I had wrong, a word I skimmed, or a guess I dressed up as reasoning? Third: what will I do differently when I next see this shape of question?

Review the questions you got right but were unsure of, too. A lucky right answer is a wrong answer that has not happened yet, and it is invisible in your score until the day it costs you.

Keep the log. Patterns surface across weeks that are invisible within a single session — that you misread graph axes, or that you rush the last ten questions of every section, or that one content area is quietly responsible for a quarter of your losses.

> Every question at harrisacademia.com explains why each option is right or wrong, not only which one won, so the three questions above have something to be answered against rather than guessed at.

CARS is a different exam wearing the same badge

Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills is 53 questions in 90 minutes and contains no science at all. Every answer is in the passage. That sounds like good news and is the reason it is the hardest section for most science students: there is nothing to know, so there is nothing to revise, and the habits that work everywhere else actively hurt here.

The commonest failure is answering from outside the passage. A choice that is true in the world and unsupported by the text is wrong, and it is wrong in a way that feels right. Train yourself to point at the line that justifies your answer. If you cannot, it is not your answer.

CARS improves slowly and only with volume. A few passages every day for months works; a weekend of passages does nothing. Start it earlier than feels necessary and never stop, because it is the one section where the last month cannot rescue you.

> CARS passages sit in the bank at harrisacademia.com next to every other section, which is the least effortful way to keep the daily volume going — the thing this section rewards and nothing else substitutes for.

Full-length exams

A full-length is a measurement instrument, and measuring something does not improve it. The improvement comes from the review afterwards, which takes longer than the exam itself and is where people cut corners because they are tired. Budget the day after, not the hour after.

Sit them under real conditions: the real start time, the real breaks, no phone, no pausing, no looking anything up. A score produced with three pauses and a glance at a textbook is not a score, it is a mood. The point is partly to rehearse the stamina, and you cannot rehearse stamina comfortably.

One a week in the final six to eight weeks is plenty. More than that leaves no room to act on what they tell you, and a sequence of full-lengths with no changes in between is just an expensive way to watch the same mistakes.

> The 9 full-lengths at harrisacademia.com keep section clocks and the real breaks, and are bought one at a time and kept permanently, so a lapsed month never costs you one.

The final two weeks

Stop learning new material. The return on a topic encountered for the first time this late is close to zero, and the cost in confidence is not. Spend the time on the things you have already half-learned, which is where the points actually are.

Shift your sleep to match test day if it does not already, and sit your last full-length at least five days before — close enough to be useful, far enough that a bad one cannot rattle you into cramming.

The day before, do nothing. Not light review, nothing. Everybody says this and almost nobody does it, and the people who do it walk in sharper.

> Practice history at harrisacademia.com reports accuracy by content category, which finds the half-learned topics faster than re-reading looking for them.

If you use this course

The Diagnostic Test is free and worth taking before you plan anything, because a plan built on where you actually are beats one built on where you assume you are. It takes 30 questions to tell you which section to protect.

Content prep here is organized by the official content categories, with a short video and a check on every topic, so that finishing a topic means having answered something rather than having read something. Videos reference Khan Academy's free MCAT collection, which costs nothing and is genuinely good: https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/x04f6bc56:welcome-to-the-mcat-course

The question bank and section practice are where the ratio above is meant to be spent, and the full-lengths are bought one at a time and kept permanently — a lapsed subscription never takes one away.

Start with the free Diagnostic Test

Thirty questions, no account, scored on the 472–528 scale. It tells you which section to protect before you plan anything. harrisacademia.com/mcat-diagnostic.html