

MCAT Test

Study Guide

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Introduction

The purpose of the exam is to establish a standard method of measurement for the skills and abilities that have been acquired by the test taker. These skills are both a measure of what a test taker has already learned and an indicator of future success.

The exam requires you to think in a thorough, quick and strategic manner, and still be accurate, logical and wise. It is designed to judge your abilities in the ways that the testing organization feel is vital to your future success.

To some extent, you have already gradually obtained these abilities over the length of your academic career. However, what you probably have not yet become familiar with is the capability to use these abilities for the purpose of maximizing performance within the complex and profound environment of a standardized, skills-based examination.

There are different strategies, mindsets and perspectives that you will be required to apply throughout the exam. You'll need to be prepared to use your whole brain as far as thinking and assessment is concerned, and you'll need to do this in a timely manner. This is not something you can learn from taking a course or reading a book, but it is something you can develop through practice and concentration.

Fortunately, the exam does not change very dramatically from year to year. This makes it a little easier to prepare knowing that any information you use to prepare with should still be accurate when you go to take the test.

The following information in this guide will lay out the format and style of the exam as well as help prepare you for the frame of mind you'll be expected to

take. If there is one skill that you take with you from your exam preparation, this should be it.

Careful preparation, as described in this expert guide, along with hard work, will dramatically enhance your probability of success. In fact, it is wise to apply this philosophy not only to your exam, but to other elements of your life as well, to raise you above the competition.

Your exam score is so important to your future success that it should not be taken lightly. Hence, a rational, prepared approach to your exam is critical.

Keep in mind, that although it may be possible to take the exam more than once, you should never take it as an “experiment” just to see how well you do. It is of extreme importance that you always be prepared to do your best when taking the exam. For one thing, it is extremely challenging to surmount a poor performance. If you are looking to take a “practice” run, look into a review course, practice tests, and, of course, this guide.

This guide provides you with the professional instruction you require for understanding the test. Covered are all aspects of the test and preparation procedures that you will require throughout the process. Upon completion of this guide, you’ll have the confidence and knowledge you need for maximizing your exam performance.

Getting Ready For Test Day

You're all set to take your exam! Now here are a few things to remember for test day:

Get there early. Know exactly where the test will be held and how you will get yourself there. Pay attention to traffic reports so that you can compensate for any unexpected issues on the road. Leaving early will mean that you'll be more relaxed; red traffic lights won't raise your stress level, and you won't be pulled over by the first officer who has to fill his speeding ticket quota. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you'll have time to use the rest room.

If you've got butterflies in your stomach, feed them! You've already done all the practice tests you can do, and you've had a good night's sleep. Now it's time to get a good, healthy breakfast - though it is wise not to overeat. Your body and mind will need the energy; plus it's distracting to listen to your stomach growl.

Give yourself a massage! Rub your head, neck and shoulders. Place your hand over your heart while taking a very slow, deep breath.

Stay on track. Remember, you don't want to rush, you only want to perform in a timely manner. Although there are time restrictions, if you misread directions, accidentally fill in the wrong answer-choice, or think illogically due to rushing, it won't be worth all the time you save. Remember, haste makes waste! Also, keep in mind that incorrect answers don't count against you, so you can always guess at any answers that you are unsure of. Remember, an educated guess is better than no guess at all! Moving through a test methodically and efficiently will likely mean that you'll have more time at the end than if you were to rush and stumble, or dawdle over questions that you're struggling with.

Most importantly (at least to your sanity), remember that once it's over, it's over. Clear your mind of it, because you did your best. Go treat yourself to a hot chocolate or an ice cream cone, catch a movie with some friends and relax!

General Strategies

Strategy 1: Understanding the Intimidation

The test writers will generally choose some material on the exam that will be completely foreign to most test takers. You can't expect all of the topics to be ones with which you have a fair amount of familiarity. If you do happen to come across a high number of topics that you are extremely familiar with, consider yourself lucky, but don't plan on that happening.

In going through each question, try and understand all of the material at your disposal, while weeding out the distracter information. Note that you won't have a nice title overhead explaining the general topic being covered but will immediately be thrown into the middle of a strange format that you don't recognize.

Getting hit by strange sounding topics that you don't recognize, of which you may only have a small exposure, is just normal on the exam. Just remember that the questions themselves will contain all the information necessary to choose a correct answer.

Strategy 2: Finding your Optimal Pace

Everyone reads and tests at a different rate. It will take practice to determine what is the optimal rate at which you can read fast and yet absorb and comprehend the information.

With practice, you will find the pace that you should maintain on the test while answering the questions. It should be a comfortable rate. This is not a speed-reading test. If you have a good pace, and don't spend too much time on any

question, you should have a sufficient amount of time to read the questions at a comfortable rate. The two extremes you want to avoid are the dumbfounded mode, in which you are lip reading every word individually and mouthing each word as though in a stupor, and the overwhelmed mode, where you are panicked and are buzzing back and forth through the question in a frenzy and not comprehending anything.

You must find your own pace that is relaxed and focused, allowing you to have time for every question and give you optimal comprehension. Note that you are looking for optimal comprehension, not maximum comprehension. If you spent hours on each word and memorized the question, you would have maximum comprehension. That isn't the goal though, you want to optimize how much you comprehend with how much time you spend reading each question. Practice will allow you to determine that optimal rate.

Strategy 3: Don't be a Perfectionist

If you're a perfectionist, this may be one of the hardest strategies, and yet one of the most important. The test you are taking is timed, and you cannot afford to spend too much time on any one question.

If you are working on a question and you've got your answer split between two possible answer choices, and you're going back through the question and reading it over and over again in order to decide between the two answer choices, you can be in one of the most frustrating situations possible. You feel that if you just spent one more minute on the problem, that you would be able to figure the right answer out and decide between the two. Watch out! You can easily get so absorbed in that problem that you lose track of time, get off track and end up spending the rest of the test playing catch up because of all the wasted time, which may leave you rattled and cause you to miss even more questions that you would have otherwise.

Therefore, unless you will only be satisfied with a perfect score and your abilities are in the top .1% strata of test takers, you should not go into the test with the mindset that you've got to get every question right. It is far better to accept that you will have to guess on some questions and possibly get them wrong and still have time for every question, than to analyze every question until you're absolutely confident in your answer and then run out of time on the test.

Strategy 4: Factually Correct, but Actually Wrong

A favorite ploy of question writers is to write answer choices that are factually correct on their own, but fail to answer the question, and so are actually wrong.

When you are going through the answer choices and one jumps out for being factually correct, watch out. Before you mark it as your answer choice, first make sure that you go back to the question and confirm that the answer choice answers the question being asked.

Strategy 5: Extraneous Information

Some answer choices will seem to fit in and answer the question being asked. They might even be factually correct. Everything seems to check out, so what could possibly be wrong?

Does the answer choice actually match the question, or is it based on extraneous information contained in the question. Just because an answer choice seems right, don't assume that you overlooked information while reading the question. Your mind can easily play tricks on you and make you think that you read something or that you overlooked a phrase.

Unless you are behind on time, always go back to the question and make sure that the answer choice “checks out.”

Strategy 6: Avoiding Definites

Answer choices that make definite statements with no “wobble room” are often wrong. Try to choose answer choices that make less definite and more general statements that would likely be correct in a wider range of situations and aren’t exclusive.

Answer choices that includes phrases like “sometimes” or “often” are more likely to be correct than answer choices with phrases like “always” or “never”.

Strategy 7: Using Common Sense

The questions on the test are not intended to be trick questions. Therefore, most of the answer choices will have a sense of normalcy about them that may be fairly obvious and could be answered simply by using common sense.

While many of the topics will be ones that you are somewhat unfamiliar with, there will likely be numerous topics that you have some prior indirect knowledge about that will help you answer the questions.

Strategy 8: Instincts are Right

When in doubt, go with your first instinct. This is an old test-taking trick that still works today. Oftentimes if something feels right instinctively, it is right.

Unfortunately, over analytical test takers will often convince themselves otherwise. Don’t fall for that trap and try not to get too nitpicky about an answer choice. You shouldn’t have to twist the facts and create hypothetical scenarios for an answer choice to be correct.

Strategy 9: No Fear

The depth and breadth of the exam can be a bit intimidating to a lot of people as it can deal with topics that have never been encountered before and are highly technical. Don't get bogged down by the information presented. Don't try to understand every facet of every question. You won't have to write an essay about the topics afterwards, so don't memorize all of the minute details. Don't get overwhelmed.

Strategy 10: Don't Get Thrown Off by New Information

Sometimes test writers will include completely new information in answer choices that are wrong. Test takers will get thrown off by the new information and if it seems like it might be related, they could choose that answer choice incorrectly. Make sure that you don't get distracted by answer choices containing new information that doesn't answer the question.

If an answer choice asks about something that wasn't even mentioned elsewhere, it's likely wrong. There has to be a connection between the answer choice and the question.

Strategy 11: Narrowing the Search

Whenever two answer choices are direct opposites, the correct answer choice is usually one of the two. It is hard for test writers to resist making one of the wrong answer choices with the same wording, but changing one word to make it the direct opposite in meaning. This can usually cue a test taker in that one of the two choices is correct. You can typically rule out the other answer choices.

Strategy 12: You're not Expected to be Einstein

The questions will contain most or all of the information that you need to know in order to answer them. You aren't expected to be Einstein or to know all related knowledge to the topic being discussed. Remember, these questions may be about obscure topics that you've never heard of. If you would need to know a lot of outside and background knowledge about a topic in order to choose a certain answer choice – it's usually wrong.

Introduction to this Guide

Your MCAT score is one of the most critical elements to your qualification to medical school, so it is naturally much too important for you to take this test unprepared. The higher your MCAT score, the better your chances of admission will be for a respected, competitive medical school.

The typical competitive medical school uses a mathematical formula which combines both your MCAT score and your undergraduate GPA (Grade Point Average) in an established index. Though the weight given to each of these scores varies among medical schools, they should both be considered vital to your acceptability. It is safe, however, to assume that your MCAT will be the determining factor when it comes to the final admission decision made by each medical school to which you've applied.

The index combining your MCAT score and your GPA will usually produce a single number that dictates to the medical school how desirable you are as a candidate for admission. Applications whose index number falls below the minimum acceptable average will rarely receive anything above a very negligible consideration.

Careful preparation, as described in this expert guide, along with hard work, will dramatically enhance your probability of success. In fact, it is wise to apply this philosophy not only to your medical school applications, but to other elements of your life as well, to raise you above the competition. Your MCAT score is one of the areas in the medical school admission progression over which you have a substantial amount of control; this opportunity should not be taken lightly. Hence, a rational, prepared approach to your MCAT as well as the rest of the admission process will contribute considerably to the likelihood of acceptance.

Keep in mind, that although it is possible to take an MCAT more than once, you

should never take the test as an “experiment” just to see how well you do. It is of extreme importance that you always be prepared to do your best when taking the MCAT. For one thing, it is extremely challenging to surmount a poor performance. If you are looking to take a “practice” run, look into review course, professionally developed mock MCAT examinations, and, of course, this guide.

This guide provides you with the professional instruction you require for understanding the traditional MCAT test. Covered are all aspects of the test and preparation procedures that you will require throughout the process. Upon completion of this guide, you’ll have the confidence and knowledge you need for maximizing your performance on your MCAT.

Testing and Analysis

It won't take you long to discover that the MCAT is unlike any test you've taken before, and it is probably unlike any test you will ever take again in your academic career. The typical high school or college test is a knowledge-based test. The MCAT, however, is skills-based.

What does this mean to you? It means that you'll have to prepare yourself in a completely different way! You won't simply be reciting memorized facts as they were phrased in some textbook, and you won't be applying any learned formulas to specific problems that will be laid out.

The MCAT requires you to think in a thorough, quick and strategic manner...and still be accurate, logical and wise.

This test is designed to judge your abilities in the ways that medical schools feel is vital to the success of first year med students.

To some extent, you have already gradually obtained these abilities over the length of your academic career. However, what you probably have not yet become familiar with is the capability to use these abilities for the purpose of maximizing performance within the complex and profound environment of a standardized, skills-based examination.

There are different strategies, mindsets and perspectives that you will be required to apply throughout the MCAT. You'll need to be prepared to use your whole brain as far as thinking and assessment is concerned, and you'll need to do this in a timely manner. This is not something you can learn from taking a course or reading a book, but it is something you can develop through practice and concentration.

The following chapters in this guidebook will lay out the format and style of the MCAT as well as give you sample questions and examples of the frame of mind you'll be expected to take. If there is one skill that you take with you from your preparation for the MCAT, this should be it.

The MCAT Scoring Scale

MCAT scoring is not hard to comprehend when it is properly explained.

There is no “passing” score to the MCAT, but you will need to know what the cut off average score is for the medical schools to which you’re looking to apply. For this information, check their website, or call, and they’ll tell you the average score of students who are accepted.

Each medical school has a different policy for weighing MCAT scores with your GPA. The majority of medical schools will weigh your MCAT score more heavily than your GPA. In fact, some schools will weigh your MCAT at 70% and your GPA at 30%, which means that this one examination is worth more than your 4 years of undergraduate work.

It’s up to you to look into the medical schools to which you’ll be applying, so that you’ll have this information, and know the exact value of your MCAT. Many schools will make their calculation structure for the combination of MCAT and GPA available to the public.

Knowing this information before you enter the MCAT examination means that you know exactly what you’re facing that day. You will have a realistic perception of the worth of the test, and you will have the proper motivation to fully apply yourself to reach your maximum potential.

You’ll also be able to realistically judge the type of school to which you should be applying, and you can better set out your future plans in your mind.

Verbal Reasoning

The Verbal Reasoning test measures a test taker's ability to understand, analyze and evaluate written passages. The passages will contain material that will be from a variety of sources and on a number of different topics.

Each of the passages and statements in the Verbal Reasoning test will be followed by a series of questions covering the content of the passage or statement, in which you will have to answer questions, which will demonstrate how well you understand the passages and are able to draw conclusions about the material.

Flying Over the Passage

A topic that is hotly debated among test taking circles is whether or not you should read the reading passages before you read the question. One theory is that you can save time if you read the questions first and then go back and read over the passage. Another theory is that you should read the passage first and then go into the questions. Both theories have their own individual merit and due to the differences in ability and preferences among test takers, one method may work better than another for you.

Our recommended theory is the flyover. You want to spend some time on the passage, at a bare minimum so that you have a general idea about what the questions are going to ask and get your mind into the proper mindset for the series of questions. However, you don't want to waste too much time on reading the passage, because much of the detail will be forgotten by the time you get to the questions anyway. Therefore, you should fly over the passage. You should read it very quickly for a high-level overview (hence the flyover) understanding of what is contained in the passage.

In part, this is a compromise between the theories that gains most of the benefits of each. You won't waste time on the details and yet will have a general idea of what the passage is about and what to expect.

Creating a Tentative Summary

After you've finished your flyover of the passage, take a few seconds and compose a tentative mental summary of what you've just read. Try to sort out the details you picked up on and arrange them into a loose organizational pattern that describes the passage. Remember that your goal in the flyover is not to check it off of a test-taking list of things to do. You want there to be some purpose behind the flyover and having the definite goal of being able to put together a brief mental summary will allow you to maintain some focus and gain benefit from the flyover – as opposed to just skimming it for the sake of skimming it without actually picking up on anything.

As you begin going through the questions and answer choices, if you get good enough at putting together your mental summaries from practice, you should be able to eliminate a number of answer choices that are immediately contrary to your summary. Note, however that if you find yourself without any good answer choices remaining (because you've eliminated them all) you obviously had to have eliminated the right answer choice. Don't hesitate to reopen an answer choice that you've already "eliminated" from consideration and reconsider it as a possibility. If you think an answer choice contradicts your initial summary, you're probably right, but are not infallible.

Openings and Endings

A main focus of this flyover will be the opening and ending sentences in each paragraph. These are likely to contain the main ideas of the paragraphs and should be mentally tagged for future reference. Try to remember a vague idea of

what the different paragraphs are about, because this will save you time when answering questions later.

For the most part, make sure you never try to just answer the questions from this first flyover. Always try to go back and confirm the answer, as your memory will play tricks on you and the writers of the test questions may deliberately have planted a trap for you – remember that they don't exactly have your best interests at heart.

Using Kitchen Logic

When a question asks the test taker to identify a main idea, you should first focus on the opening and ending sentences of the passage and each individual paragraph. If you can't find the main idea from these key sentences, then ask yourself how you would describe the passage to someone who had never read it. Which words and phrases would you use to explain the principle ideas of the passage?

This is called "Kitchen Logic" - when you explain something the way you would if you were talking to your friends and family, while sitting at your kitchen table. So, when faced with identifying the main idea of a difficult passage, make it easier on yourself by backing away from the passage and thinking about it in terms of using easy "kitchen logic".

Getting into the Author's Mind

A number of questions become much easier when you place yourself into the mind of the author of the passage. Ask yourself a few different questions:

"Why did the author write this passage?"

"What was the author trying to say?"

“What angle is the author taking?”

“What is the single most important point the author is trying to make?”

Put yourself in the shoes of the author and imagine that you wrote the passage and try to identify what you were trying to describe and how you were trying to describe it. If you take on the opinions and ideas expressed by the author as your own, then it becomes easier to answer questions that would be easy for the author to answer.

Emotional Words

Each question will be about a different angle of the passage. For questions asking about the author’s emotions, find words in the passage that are adjectives describing emotions.

So, if a question asks what sort of attitude an author had towards the passage or subject, then look throughout the passage for attitude words that might convey a positive or negative attitude. Are words such as brilliant, excited, delightful used, or are words such as depressive, gloomy, disappointing used?

A lot of questions could be answered correctly simply by going through and circling all the adjectives in a passage. Without looking at anything else except for the adjectives in a passage, most questions about attitude or emotion could be answered correctly.

Another way of handling these situations is to arrange all of the answer choices in a list going from most negative to most positive.

Example:

Question: The author’s attitude on this topic is best described as:

A. indignation

- B. eagerness
- C. impartiality
- D. fear

Now arrange these in order from negative to positive:

(-) indignation, fear, impartiality, eagerness (+)

This will help sort out the different choices and keep you from overlooking an answer choice and making an easy mistake.

Finding the Key Words

The strategy of finding certain “give-away” words does not only apply to adjectives in questions about emotions or attitude. Many questions about specific details will have key words that hold the “key” to finding the right part of the passage to look in for the answer.

Rather than answering based on your memory of the passage, you always want to have support for your answer choice rooted in a specific part of the passage. To gain that support, it follows that you have to identify which part of the passage to look in. While reading back over the entire passage may be the most foolproof method of finding that important part of the passage, it definitely is not the most time economical method of finding that part of the passage.

A better route is to find key words in the question or answer choices that are likely to stand out in the passage and will enable you to quickly narrow your search down. These key words will be nouns or verbs in the question or answer choices. Once you’ve identified possible key words, then you should scan through the passage quickly looking for either those key words to be repeated in the passage, or their synonyms to appear in the passage. Once you find a particular part of the passage that either has the exact key word repeated or a

synonym of the key word, you have probably identified the particular part of the passage that will contain the support or justification that you need to correctly answer the question and will allow you to be confident in your answer choice selection.

One warning that should be made here is that often question writers may use the exact same word or wording in their answer choices that are used in the passage, but have done so in such a way as to mislead you. So, simply because a particular word or phrase appears in an answer choice and also appears exactly the same in a passage does not make that answer choice correct. Be sure that you reread the answer choice and consider the context that it is in, to ensure that you are not misled by a cheap trick.

In conclusion, always try to connect the question to the right words in the passage that will allow you to save time in finding the right part of the passage to look in for the answer and will give you the key to the correct answer choice.

Making Proper Inferences

Questions that ask you to make an inference from the passage will require you to use your own personal judgment. Anything directly stated by the author is not an inference. You will need to understand the main idea of the passage in order to make a proper inference about the author's intent and mindset.

The obvious will not be enough to answer an inference question. You must logically deduce what follows from what the author has stated in the passage. You are looking for what can be inferred by the passage, not what is directly stated in the passage.

Applying Ideas for Generalizations

Generalization questions are similar to inference questions in that you have to go beyond what is directly stated in the passage by the author. It helps to put yourself again in the author's shoes. If you were the author and believed in what you had just written, how would you feel about another similar situation? What would either strengthen or weaken your argument. How would you apply the information you have just expressed to a completely different situation?

Using Context Clues

Context clues are a valuable aide in helping you understand difficult phrases or words in the passage. A number of questions will ask you about the meaning of words as they are used in a given passage.

If you already know the definition of the word, or have some familiarity with it, a common mistake is to go with your first impulse and choose the answer that you immediately recognize. However, the reason the test writers may have chosen that particular vocabulary word is because it is used in an unusual context. Therefore, return to the passage and find where the word is used and make sure that you understand how it is being used in the passage.

Once you've made your choice of a good definition go back again to the passage and reread that particular section, but mentally replace the answer choice you've chosen for the word being asked about.

Example:

A passage states: "He was notorious for making decisions on the spur of the moment..."

Question: Which of the following words, if substituted for the word “notorious” would introduce the LEAST change in the meaning of the sentence?

- A. evil
- B. disturbed
- C. famous
- D. despised

If you knew that the most common definition for “notorious” meant being known in an unfavorable sense, then you might be tempted to choose choice A, “evil.”

But once you review back over the passage, choice C, “famous” fits in better into the context of the sentence of passage. Read the sentence again and substitute your chosen answer choice for the word it replaces. This gives you:

“He was famous for making decisions on the spur of the moment...,” which makes sense and is correct.

Breaking Down Passage Organization

In trying to understand the author’s perspective, you will sometimes be asked about how the passage is organized. Many times, the simplest way to find the answer is to note how the opening sentence in a passage or paragraph relates to the rest of the passage. How does the author’s main idea get developed and broken down into supporting ideas and statements?

As you go through the answer choices for these organization problems, quiz yourself on each answer choice.

Example:

Question: Which of the following best describes the organization of the author's discussion of this topic?

- A. He provides an example – Ask yourself, is there an example in the question? Don't work exclusively from your memory. Make sure you can go back and actually find the example in the passage.
- B. He makes a comparison – Ask yourself, is there a comparison in the question? Again, go back to the passage and actually find the comparison being made and verify that it exists.
- C. He makes an acknowledgement – Ask yourself, where is the acknowledgement made and to whom?
- D. He discusses a theory – Ask yourself, which theory is being discussed?

After each of these initial questions, remember that it is not enough for them simply to be true; they have to answer the question. Simply because the author provided an example doesn't make choice A correct. The example provided may have been to support a comparison that he was making and the comparison may be the main method of organization, which in this case would make answer choice B correct. So always read all the answer choices and only choose the one that is the best, not just the first one you read that is factually correct.

First Word Analysis

When asked for main ideas that best summarize the passage, an easy strategy is to look at the first words in each answer choice and without looking at the rest of the answer choice, see if you could make a decision based on those first words alone.

Example:

Question: Which of the following best explains the author's primary purpose?

- A. dispute...
- B. describe...

- C. condemn...
- D. convince...

If you know that the passage is fairly neutral about the subject, then even if you know nothing else, you can probably eliminate the stronger verbs used in answer choices A, C, and D, leaving you with “describe” or answer choice B as being correct.

Understanding the Intimidation

The test writers will generally choose passages that will be completely foreign to most test takers. You can't expect the passages to be on a topic with which you have any familiarity. If you do happen to come across a passage that you are familiar with, consider yourself lucky, but don't plan on that happening.

The passages will also frequently be drawn from longer passages in books, articles, journals, etc. Therefore, the passage that you will face on the test may almost seem out of context and as though it begins in the middle of a thought process. You won't have a nice title overhead explaining the general topic being covered but will immediately be thrown into the middle of a strange format that you don't recognize.

Also, while the topics chosen may have originally been interesting reading in their original state, after a particular section is pulled and used for the test passage, it will likely be dry and boring.

Getting hit by strange reading topics that you don't recognize, of which you may only have a small part of the original selection, and that are dry and boring can be a bit intimidating if you're not adequately prepared. Just remember that the passages themselves will contain all the information necessary to answer the

questions and you don't need any prior knowledge of the topic in order to succeed and do well on the test.

Finding your Optimal Pace

Everyone reads at a different rate. It will take practice to determine what is the optimal rate at which you can read fast and yet absorb and comprehend the information. This is true for both the flyover that you should initially conduct and then the subsequent reading you will have to do as you go through and begin answering the questions. However, on the flyover, you are looking for only a surface level knowledge and are not trying to comprehend the minutia of details that will be contained in the passages.

You can practice with any form of reading material. Read an article at your normal pace and then after you're finished, ask yourself some questions about what you just read and see how well you can comprehend. Experiment with reading articles faster and slower and always gauge how well you comprehended what you read at the end. Train your brain to remember the details and absorb the facts.

With practice, you will find the pace that you should maintain on the test while going back through passages. It should be a comfortable rate. This is not a speed reading exercise. If you have a good pace, and don't spend too much time on any question, you should have a sufficient amount of time to read the different sections of the passages at a comfortable rate. The two extremes you want to avoid are the dumbfounded mode, in which you are lip reading every word individually and mouthing each word as though in a stupor, and the overwhelmed mode, where you are panicked and are buzzing back and forth through the passage in a frenzy and not comprehending anything.

You must find your own pace that is relaxed and focused, allowing you to have time for every question and give you optimal comprehension. Note that you are looking for optimal comprehension, not maximum comprehension. If you spent hours on each word and memorized the passage, you would have maximum comprehension. That isn't the goal though, you want to optimize how much you comprehend with how much time you spend reading. Practice will allow you to determine that optimal rate.

Don't be a Perfectionist

If you're a perfectionist, this may be one of the hardest strategies, and yet one of the most important. The test you are taking is timed, and you cannot afford to spend too much time on any one question.

If you are working on a problem and you've got your answer split between two possible answer choices, and you're going back through the passage and reading it over and over again in order to decide between the two, you can be in one of the most frustrating situations possible. You feel that if you just spent one more minute on the problem, that you would be able to figure the right answer out and decide between the two. Watch out! You can easily get so absorbed in that problem that you lose track of time, get off track and end up spending the rest of the test playing catch up because of all the wasted time, which may leave you rattled and cause you to miss even more questions that you would have otherwise.

Therefore, unless you will only be satisfied with a perfect score and your abilities are in the top .1% strata of test takers, you should not go into the test with the mindset that you've got to get every question right. It is far better to accept that you will have to guess on some questions and possibly get them wrong and still have time for every question, than to work on every problem until you're

absolutely confident in your answer and then run out of time on the last few problems.

Factually Correct, but Actually Wrong

A favorite ploy of question writers is to write answer choices that are factually correct on their own, but fail to answer the question, and so are actually wrong.

When you are going through the answer choices and one jumps out for being factually correct, watch out. Before you mark it as your answer choice, first make sure that you go back to the question and confirm that the answer choice answers the question being asked.

Different Viewpoints

Some passages will express the author's viewpoint on a topic, along with the viewpoint of other experts or other individuals. This can lead to trouble in answering questions though. If asked for the viewpoint of the author, you might go back to the passage, find where a certain viewpoint is expressed, answer the question based on what you read and move on.

For most passages, that would be fine, but when other viewpoints besides the author's are expressed, you have to discern who is expressing their opinion in the passage. Make sure that if multiple individuals are giving their viewpoint on a topic, that you sort them out for any questions and associate the right viewpoint with the right individual.

Extraneous Information

Some answer choices will seem to fit in and answer the question being asked. They might even be factually correct. Everything seems to check out, so what could possibly be wrong?

Does the answer choice actually match the passage, or is it based on extraneous information not even contained in the passage. Just because an answer choice seems right, don't assume that you overlooked information while reading the passage. Always try to go back and find the support for the answer choice in the passage. Your mind can easily play tricks on you and make you think that you read something or that you overlooked a phrase.

Unless you are behind on time, always go back to the passage and make sure that the answer choice "checks out."

The Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences Test

The Physical Sciences Test and Biological Sciences Test both have a similar basic format. Most of the questions are related a series of short passages, with several questions for each passage. The remaining questions are independent of each other and any passage. These questions will test your knowledge of basic principles and concepts in physics and general chemistry for the Physical Sciences section, and organic chemistry and biology for the Biological Sciences Section.

While a general knowledge of these subjects is important, a complete mastery of them is NOT necessary to succeed on the MCAT Physical Sciences and Biological Sciences test. Don't be intimidated by the questions presented. They do not require highly advanced knowledge, but only the ability to recognize common problem types and apply basic principles and concepts to solving them.

That is our goal, to show you the simple methods to solving these problems, so that while you will not gain a mastery of these subjects from this guide, you will learn the methods necessary to succeed on the MCAT.

These tests may scare you. It may have been years since you've studied some of the basic concepts covered, and for even the most accomplished and studied student, these terms may be unfamiliar. General test-taking skill will help the most. DO NOT run out of time, move quickly, and use the easy pacing methods we outlined in the verbal test section.

The most important thing you can do is to ignore your fears and jump into the test immediately- do not be overwhelmed by any strange-sounding terms. You have to jump into the test like jumping into a pool- all at once is the easiest way.

Managing your time on this test can prove to be extremely difficult, as some of the questions may leave you stumped and countless minutes may waste away

while you rack your brain for the answer. To be successful though, you must work efficiently and get through the entire test before running out of time.

Highly Technical Questions May Not Be

Sometimes a single piece of information may be given to you as part of the passage.

Example:

A physician examining a newly discovered tribe of people deep in the Amazon jungles found that the relative total surface area of their capillaries was greater than that previously reported for any other people. If the physician were to predict the average velocity of blood through their capillaries, which of the following values would be the most reasonable.

Note: Blood velocity is lowest in the capillaries (averaging 3cm/sec).

- A. 2 cm/sec
- B. 3 cm/sec
- C. 4 cm/sec
- D. 5 cm/sec

You know that 3 cm/sec is the standard, which is choice B. Without understanding any of the subject matter, it is possible to choose the correct answer, which is A. The reason is because there is only answer, which is less than 3 cm/sec, while there are two answers that are greater than 3 cm/sec. Since you are not looking for an exact answer, but only a reasonable answer, then you can conclude that if the correct answer was greater than 3 cm/sec, then TWO answer choices would meet that criteria. However, if the correct answer is less than 3 cm/sec, only ONE answer choice meets that criteria, meaning it is likely to be the correct answer.

Experiments

As you read passages related to experiments, you should start by asking yourself basic questions including: What is the experiment designed to find out?, What is the experimental method? What are the variables? What are the controls? (Controls are precautions taken to eliminate all variables except the independent variable.) What are the results? Look for flaws in the experiment. Are the controls adequate? Is the conclusion justified by the data? Are the experimental errors so great as to invalidate the results? Once you thoroughly understand the nature of the experiment and the meaning of the results, you should be able to deal with the multiple-choice questions based on the experiment.

Experiment Differences

The best way to remember three different but similar experiments is to focus on the differences between the experiments. Between the first and second experiment, what was changed? Between the second and third experiment, what was done differently? That will keep the overall experiments properly aligned in your mind. What variables changed between the experiments?

Warning: Notes Ahead

Beware of notes given after a passage. The information provided in those additional notes is not meaningless. It was given for a reason and you can be sure that one of the questions will relate to it. Make sure you don't pass over the note and that you bear it in mind while answering the questions. Often the note will add critical information to your understanding of the problem.

Backtrack for Units

When faced with a problem that you don't know the formula for, simply solve for the units in the answer choices. The units in the answer choices are your key to

understanding what mathematical relationship exists between the numbers given in the question.

Example: A 600 Hz sound wave has a velocity of 160 m/s. What is the wavelength of this sound wave?

Even if you do not know the formula for wavelengths, you can backtrack to get the answer by using the units in the answer choices. The answer choices are:

- A. 0.17 m
- B. 0.27 m
- C. 0.35 m
- D. 0.48 m

You know that Hz is equal to 1/s. To get an answer in m, when working with a m/s and a 1/s from the problem, you must divide the m/s by 1/s, which will leave an answer in meters or m. Therefore $(160 \text{ m/s}) / (600 \text{ 1/s}) = .27 \text{ m}$, making choice B correct.

Don't Fall for the Obvious

When in doubt of the answer, it is easy to go with what you are familiar with. If you recognize only one term in four answer choices, you may be inclined to guess at that term. Be careful though, and don't go with familiar answers simply because they are familiar.

Example: Changing the temperature of the solution in Experiment II to 373K would most likely result in:

- A. boiling the solution
- B. freezing the solution
- C. dissolving the compound
- D. saturating the solution

You know that 373K is the boiling point of pure water. Therefore choice A is familiar, because you have a mental link between the temperature 373K and the word “boiling”. If you are unsure of the correct answer, you may decide upon choice A simply because of its familiarity. Don’t be deceived though. Think through the other answer choices before making your final selection. Just because you have a mental link between two terms, doesn’t make an answer choice correct.

Milk the Passage

Some of the passages may throw you completely off. They might deal with a subject you have not been exposed to, or one that you haven’t reviewed in years. While your lack of knowledge about the subject will be a hindrance, the passage itself can give you many clues that will help you find the correct answer. Read the passage carefully, and look for clues. Watch particularly for adjectives and nouns describing difficult terms or words that you don’t recognize. Regardless of if you understand a word or not, replacing it with the synonyms used for it in the passage may help you to understand what the questions are asking.

Example: A bacteriophage is a virus that infects bacteria....

While you may not know much information concerning the characteristics of a bacteriophage, the fifth word into the passage told you that a bacteriophage is a virus. Whenever a question asks about a bacteriophage, you can mentally replace the word “bacteriophage” with the word “virus”. Your more general knowledge of viruses will enable you to answer the question intelligibly.

Look carefully for these descriptive synonyms (nouns) and adjectives and use them to help you understand the difficult terms. Rather than wracking your mind about specific detail information concerning a difficult term in the passage, use the more general description or synonym provided to make it easier for you.

Understanding the Passage

Don't waste precious time trying to completely understand the passages. They can contain complicated information that is hard to decipher. Skim through and get a general idea of what the passage is about and then head straight for the questions. As you go through the questions, determine what is being asked and then return to the passage to find the correct answer.

I, II, or III only

Some questions will ask which of the following choices would likely be correct.

Example:

- A. I only
- B. III only
- C. I and II only
- D. I and III only

As you can see, choice # II did not have an answer choice dedicated to it. There is a good chance that choice # II is not correct, meaning that you could immediately rule out answer C, which includes choice # II. This narrows your selection to A, B, and D, and increases your chance of getting the question correct if you had to guess. Remember though, if you are fairly confident that choice # II is part of the answer, disregard this advice.

Random Tips

- On fact questions that require choosing between numbers, don't guess the smallest or largest choice unless you're sure of the answer.
- For questions that you're not clear on the answer, use the process of elimination. Weed out the answer choices that you know are wrong before choosing an answer.

- Don't fall for "bizarre" choices, mentioning things that are not relevant to the passage. Also avoid answers that sound "smart." Only choose these if you are confident that the choice is correct.

Writing

The Writing sample of the MCAT asks you to write two essays on two different topics, each in 30 minutes or less.

Four different readers will grade your passages, two for each passage. Your score on the writing section is the sum of their individual scores converted to an alphabetic scale. You need to know that in evaluating your essays, readers are looking for your essay to be well organized and properly developed. All of the main ideas should be clearly outlined and explained. They should be error free and contain a variety of examples and reasoning to explain your ideas.

Planning Stage

You should spend a few minutes planning and jotting down a few quick notes. Consider the position you are taking, determine a few good reasons for making your choice, some evidence or explanation that support the choice, some effective details you might include, and what order you should use to effectively present your points.

Sticking to the Plan

You should spend the bulk of your time writing your essay. Refer back to your plan, remembering that the topic requires you to make a choice or take a position, and explain your reasoning in some detail. You should also consider the criterion specified so that your essay is convincing to the addressed audience. Make sure that the language you choose communicates your ideas clearly and appropriately.

Reviewing the Plan

You should spend a few minutes reviewing your writing, adding or removing as necessary and making any changes needed to enhance clarity.

You should make clear the answer and angle you will choose for your essay, offering a few good reasons for your choice and explaining your reasoning in some detail. As you explain the reasons for your choice, you should develop explanations for each, including such things as evidence, examples, or observations.

Brainstorming Smart

Brainstorming is a process of directing your mind toward idea generation. Every book on essays will advise you to brainstorm. It's a method proven to be successful for several reasons. This is the point at which different writers will begin to disagree about how to brainstorm.

The method of brainstorming that is recommended here is two-tier. First you have to brainstorm about what you are going to write about. You want to determine what is going to be the focus of your essay.

Example:

Sample topic: "If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? Discuss why."

Example Brainstorming Level 1: What should I write about?

Intelligence, looks, personality, wealth, family, friends, time, fame, etc.

Your first impulse, and honest reaction, might be to respond with something such as making yourself more beautiful, more intelligent, or more popular. But remember that you want to be able to write at length about this topic. If you

choose an answer that while truthful, may sound shallow to an essay reader, such as to become more beautiful and better looking, then you probably won't win any points with the reader.

Don't automatically go with your first impulse. The scorer is not giving points for essays that are the most honest, but for essays that are the best written. A well-written essay needs substantial support to explain the reasoning behind your choice.

A choice such as more intelligence could sound shallow, but with a little creativity, you can turn this into an excellent essay. Instead of stating that you want to be more intelligent in order to get better grades, use deeper reasoning. Explain what you would do with that added intelligence. Give examples of how your side research into molecular biology and genetics would be greatly improved with added intelligence and enable you to have a greater chance at your goal of contributing to finding a cure for cancer or diabetes.

If you choose "more popularity" as your topic, you could discuss how you would use your popularity in order to persuade more people to support your humanitarian causes and to be a positive role model for others.

After you've decided which topic you are going to write about, then you should begin the second wave of brainstorming, which will be about what you want to discuss about your chosen topic, which examples you want to use and which observations you hope to present.

Example Brainstorming Level 2: You've chosen to write about having more free time. Now you brainstorm about what you should say to support that choice. spend more time with friends and family, work at a local homeless shelter, write a novel, open a new business, adopt some children, enjoy your hobbies, etc.

You have to have a proper balance at each level. If you spent too much time at brainstorming level 1, then you won't have time to decide on what you want to use as examples in level 2. But if you spend too little time at brainstorming level 1, then you may not come up with a really good topic to use for your essay. A good strategy is to practice using this two level brainstorming process until you get comfortable with using it and quickly generating lots of ideas.

Making the Cuts

Once you've finished the brainstorming level 2 process, you should look over the supporting ideas you hope to use and the examples you've written down from the brainstorming process. Look back over the ideas and see which ones look the best. Which ones could you write the most about and would give you the most sound reasoning and logic to back up your initial decision of what to write about?

Make mental notes about which supporting ideas from brainstorming level 2 you hope to use, because those will be the ones that will comprise your successive body paragraphs.

Your goal is to hit the high notes. Pick the best ideas you've developed and write about those. You only need 3-5 good ideas to write about and may have a loss of focus if you try to write about more than a few important supporting topics.

Ending at the Start

Many essay writers will start off by writing their introductory paragraph, along with the main ideas and supporting ideas that will be used, and then force fit the essay into the guidelines that they have predetermined for their essay.

The problem with this is that many of the best ideas will occur to a writer while writing the essay. Rather than immediately jumping into writing your introductory

paragraph, take the brainstorming ideas that you've developed and begin writing your essay, by expanding on each of the supporting ideas that you've chosen and writing your body paragraphs first.

As you write your body paragraphs, new ideas may occur to you that you would prefer to use. Rather than having to go back and make changes to your introductory paragraph, since you haven't written it yet, you can just adopt the new ideas as you write and incorporate them into your body paragraphs.

When you're finished writing your body paragraphs, which should each include at least one primary supporting idea, then you can go back and write your introductory paragraph and make sure that it matches up with each of your body paragraphs and covers the overall topic you are discussing.

Additionally, don't make the mistake of writing too much in your introductory paragraph. The introduction is not where you explain your reasoning. Save your logic for the body paragraphs, and only use the introductory paragraph in order to briefly outline what you are going to discuss. Brevity is better than wordiness in an introduction.

Staying Consistent

A lot of writers write their introductory paragraph, then their body paragraphs, and then their conclusion at the end. The problem with this is that often the whole focus of the essay may have morphed as the writer wrote the essay and the conclusion seems to have a completely different focus than the introduction and the body paragraphs seem to lead take the reader through a tortuous path that changes course with every sentence.

It is vitally important that the introductory and concluding paragraphs are consistent with each other and that the body paragraphs match the introduction and conclusion. You want your paper to be consistent throughout.

Writing your introduction at the end, after you've written your body paragraphs, and then following it with your conclusion will be a huge help in maintaining the consistency, but always look back over your essay when you're finished and make sure that the essay keeps the same focus all the way through.

Maintaining the Flow

Part of maintaining consistency in your essay is the proper use of transition words while you're writing. Use transition words to maintain the essay's flow. Transition words such as first, second, third, finally, also, additionally, in conclusion, in summary, and furthermore all give the reader an understanding of how the paragraphs flow together.

Example:

Paragraph 1: Introduction

Paragraph 2: First of all, ...

Paragraph 3: Secondly, ...

Paragraph 4: Finally, ...

Paragraph 5: In summary, ...

Backing up Your Points

If you make a point or statement in your essay, make sure that you back it up with clear examples from your personal experience or observation. Don't let your points remain unsupported, but ensure that they are provided with some back up substance.

Example: You make the statement, “Renovating older downtowns can be expensive, but is definitely a worthwhile endeavor.”

While many readers may agree with this statement, it shouldn’t be made without backup support:

Consider the following as backup for that example statement: My own hometown created a ten year plan to renovate their downtown area. A higher sales tax was passed in order to pay for the renovation, which ultimately cost \$1 million dollars. But once it was finished, the sales tax was removed and the antique shops, which now fill much of the downtown, attract tourists and collectors from hundreds of miles away. The downtown is now completely self-supporting and is a constant source of both pride and new tax revenue to the town’s residents.

Using Proper Grammar

Remember that this essay is your chance to write and make yourself look good and well educated. It is not a test of your knowledge of grammar rules. You don’t have to demonstrate knowledge of every nuance of grammar. Therefore, if you find yourself wondering whether a given phrase should have commas around it or not, rewrite the phrase such that you’re confident it doesn’t need commas or does need commas. There is no need to have any punctuation in your essay that you are only 50% confident of being correct and conforming to the rules of grammar.

Example: You write, “Each of us must choose which path to take in life, whether to strive for improvement, or to settle in to their surroundings.”

You aren’t sure whether you need a comma or a colon after the phrase “to take in life” in the preceding sentence.

Simply rewrite the sentence until you are confident in how it is phrased. Change it to something such as:

“There are two paths: strive for improvement, or settle into surroundings.”

At this point you know you are using the colon properly, and so you can feel free to move on in your essay without fear of having made a grammar mistake.

Watching Your Vocabulary

Many essay writers feel that they have to impress the reader with the vocabulary that they have at their disposal. While a good vocabulary can be impressive, and the right word used at the right time can make an essay appear much more professional, they should only be used with caution.

Often a big vocabulary word will be used out of context and it will have the reverse effect. Rather than looking impressive, a vocabulary word used improperly will detract from the essay. So, if you think of a word that you don't commonly use, only use it if you are absolutely positive of its meaning and are sure that you are using it at the right place. Most of the time, you will be safer by sticking with words you are familiar with and accustomed to using.

Avoiding Tunnel Vision

Remember that the goal of your essay is to properly cover a topic and write an essay that is somewhat exhaustive in showing every angle and perspective. A lot of writers get tunnel vision. One particular angle occurs to them as the most important and they hammer away at that angle of the topic throughout the entire essay.

Discussing the same angle of a topic at length is considered essay depth. Discussing different angles of the same topic is considered essay breadth. Your goal is to have greater breadth than depth. This isn't a 20-page thesis written on a specific, obscure topic. Your topics will be fairly generic and broad-based and should have lots of different angles to consider and write about. You want to touch on as many different angles as you can, while still providing supporting backup for each statement you make.

Don't get stuck in a rut with tunnel vision. Be sure you are spending proper amounts of time on each angle you intend to discuss and not spend the entire essay writing about the same angle.

Example: The topic is whether or not athletics represents too much a part of today's academic institutions, and you intend to take the side that athletics is not too much of a part.

Your main angle is that an education is far more than simply academics and that athletics programs foster a richer, more diverse education. However, don't get stuck talking about that one angle. Consider writing about how athletic programs create ties to the community that academics does not. Discuss how athletic programs also encourage donations that benefit academics, as well as athletics.

Always try to consider multiple angles and avoid getting tunnel vision.

Just Do It

Some writers will begin their essay by rephrasing the question and talking about the different possibilities. Rather than stating what you're going to do: just do it.

Don't use the introduction as a chance to expose your mental ramblings. The introduction should be concise and to the point.

Example – Bad introduction: In this essay, I am going to discuss the thing that I consider to be the most important quality in an individual. It was a difficult decision to make, because there were so many qualities to choose from. Good looks is only skin deep, but intelligence, character, and personality run much deeper. I think the one that is most important is character. Character is the most important because it defines a person, exposes their true nature, and provides strength to overcome any obstacle.

Example – Good introduction: While every characteristic in an individual is important, one stands alone: character. Character defines individuals, and exposes their true nature. When obstacles arise, character provides the strength to overcome them.

Notice how this second example is clear, concise, and does not ramble on about the decision or ideas that are occurring to the writer.

Conclusion is Review

A conclusion is just that: a conclusion. It wraps everything that you've written thus far up into a neat summary paragraph. This is not the time to begin introducing new arguments and new reasoning. You want to make sure that you are quickly and concisely reviewing what you've written and have a solid ending in which you come across as having proved your point, and made your case effectively.

So, when you're ready to begin your conclusion, make sure that you've flushed out all the new angles you want to cover. Then go back over what you're written and tie it all together at the end, hitting briefly on all the angles that you've discussed.

Additionally, a conclusion is not an apology. You should never apologize for not knowing more or writing more. End your essay with purpose and definitively summarize what you have stated.

Communicating Reason, not Passion

The readers that read and score your essay are not looking for passionate essays that are full of hot air and lacking in reason. They are interested in well thought out essays that communicate reasonable arguments and logic, backed up by sound examples and observations. If the topic you choose is one that you are passionate about, make sure that you present more than just heated emotion, but also cool logic.

Example: The topic is about school uniforms, and you are passionately opposed.

Rather than writing, "School uniforms is a stupid idea, and will never work," try writing, "School uniforms have been an admitted failure by their original sponsors in all three implementation efforts during the last decade."

The first statement may be full of passion, but clearly lacks reason, while the second statement contains solid facts as examples.

Answering the Why?

While it's important that you communicate reason, misguided reason is ineffective. Always make sure that the examples you are providing and the reasoning you are using is being directed at answering the topic question.

Flawless logic that doesn't answer the question and doesn't contribute to the point you're trying to make is completely useless. As you think of main ideas and

supporting ideas to use, take a few seconds and confirm that they will adequately answer the topic and veer off down a tangent that is not directly related.

Example: The topic is about what was the most important thing you have ever learned in school and asks you to discuss why.

Your answer is a quest for knowledge. Your supporting ideas include having been forced to work on large projects and do exhaustive research into topics that you normally wouldn't read about, which expanded your mind.

A tangent that you would not want to pursue might be to provide statistics on how many hours you worked on a research paper in elementary school. While factual, those facts do not help answer why a quest for knowledge is the most important thing you have ever learned in school.

Make sure that the facts and reasons you are stating directly help you in your goal of answering the topic question.

Post MCAT

After the MCAT test, when you've had the time to rest and relax from the stress you put your brain through, take the time to critically evaluate your test performance. This will help you gain valuable insight into how you performed, what sort of score you should be expecting (and therefore what schools will be within your scope for application) and the sort of mindset you'll be expected to utilize when you're actually in medical school.

Remember, this is neither an opportunity to over-inflate your ego, nor to put yourself down. The main idea is to make your self-evaluation objective and critical, so that you will achieve an accurate view of how things will pan out.

This doesn't mean that you should begin a session of "if only I'd..." or "I shouldn't have..." This will only depress you. The point of this exercise is to keep you grounded, open minded and optimistic.

Soon enough, you'll receive your score, and the applications will start rolling out. Make it an organized procedure, keeping as prepared and informed as you were with your MCAT, and this will only lead to a bright, successful medical career in your future!