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How Should I Prepare For Medical School in College?

Follow the guidelines below to create a winning medical school application!

[Click here](#) for a key that will enable you to easily use the advice below if you are starting the process later than your first year of college.

Freshman Year

STEP 1: LAY A FOUNDATION IN YOUR SCIENCE COURSEWORK

If you already know you want to go to medical school, then this is the time to focus on your grades. Be careful not to overload your schedule. Overcoming poor grades in your freshman year takes tons of energy and is always an uphill battle. It's better to start strong. Plus, doing well now prepares you for the upper division coursework in coming years. If you have one difficult class that is weighing you down, visit the professor during office hours and ask questions. They may have a teaching style that you've never seen before. Make it your goal to learn everything you can from them, without giving up.

STEP 2: LOOK FOR POSSIBLE MENTORS

Mentors are anyone who will guide you with valuable input on your path to medical school. Look to professors, volunteer supervisors, and practicing physicians who seem eager to teach and share their wisdom. Spend extra time learning what they do and ask questions about their career path. If you eventually request a letter of recommendation, you won't be just another name but a real person they want to help succeed.

STEP 3: VOLUNTEER.

You can volunteer to help others in any way you can imagine, but make sure that it changes you. In other words, don't volunteer just to look good. Truly giving your time and support can affect you in a personal way and motivate you to do even more. With the right motivation and this approach, you will be amazed at how much you enjoy and benefit from your volunteer experience.

STEP 4: EXPLORE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Getting a position in a lab can be downright competitive. Most labs are looking for their version of a restaurant dishwasher, so don't be surprised if you get your start cleaning glassware, monitoring supplies and doing general labor. Think of this as your apprenticeship. Once you show that you are reliable and hard-working, they may move you up to a more interesting role. Everyone has to start somewhere. If you



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are wondering what type of research suits you, ask your professors or mentors for ideas. They may even know of a study that needs volunteers.

STEP 5: MAINTAIN PERSONAL INTERESTS

There are so many premed requirements that you may feel like you are putting your own life on hold. Well, of course, you are. However, a bland, boring application does not stand out from the crowd, and a bland, boring life does not make for a caring and compassionate doctor.

Make time to pursue your passion for music, art, sports, or other hobbies. Try to fit your practice into small bits of time, so that you can come back to it whenever you need a break from studying. This will serve you well in future years when you have even less time and need an outlet for stress. Finding the ability to relax and find joy is a valuable skill, so don't forget to figure out what you love and do it!

STEP 6: GET YOUR FEET WET BY SHADOWING

This is a great way to get exposure to medical practice, so ideally you should try to observe several different specialties. Then, once you have a direction in mind, look for opportunities to pursue more active volunteering in the years to come.

Sophomore Year

STEP 1: START YOUR MCAT PREP/REVIEW COURSE

Yes, it's early, but hopefully you have taken most of the classes needed for the MCAT by the end of this year, so the subjects will be fresh in your mind. If there are some courses you have not yet taken, use this as an intro to help you do better in the class when you take it. Find a review course that provides plenty of practice exams and retake the same ones every few months, even if you did well. It's the practice that counts!

Consider taking the review course full-time during the summer between your sophomore and junior years of college so that you can take the MCAT at the end of the summer.

STEP 2: SPEND TIME WITH YOUR MENTORS

Hopefully by now you have identified a few mentors who will go to bat for you and write a letter of recommendation that is passionate and supportive of your goals. Spend this year getting to know your mentors better. Show up at their office hours, volunteer for a research project, help grade exams. Find a way to show them your work ethic and people skills. The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized.



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STEP 3: DEEPEN YOUR COMMITMENT TO 1-2 FAVORITE VOLUNTEER ACTIVITIES

By this point you should have found a volunteer activity that you enjoy. You can cut back on the variety of things you do now and focus on 1 or 2 main activities that you are good at and make you feel like your time was well spent. If at all possible, assume responsibility by participating on committees or helping to organize events.

STEP 4: EXPLORE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

If you have discovered what type of research you are interested in, now is the time to pursue it on a deeper level. Offer to do a literature search, contribute to a poster, or take on more serious responsibility. This is the time to develop new skills, so be proactive in your education. Washing beakers for three years will not be the best use of your time.

If you find that you don't love bench work, there are plenty of other ways to gain key research experience. These include clinical trials, epidemiological studies, and health economics research, just to name a few. Medical schools find these to be just as relevant to the practice of medicine, if not more so. Ultimately, it's not the type of research that matters, but rather paying attention to detail, learning to interpret data, and being able to communicate your findings. If you develop these skills, your research experience will make your overall application stronger.

STEP 5: GET SOME ACTIVE HANDS-ON CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

You've done some shadowing, and now is the time for action. Get your hands dirty, or at least find an opportunity to put gloves on. Become a patient educator, a hospital aid, a medical assistant, or some role in which you have contact, either verbal or physical, with actual patients. This activity will show that you are comfortable in a clinical setting and may give you some great things to write about in your personal statement.

Junior Year

STEP 1: TAKE THE MCAT

If you didn't take the MCAT over the summer, your junior year is an ideal time to take the MCAT. You have taken all the required coursework, so most of it will be fresh in your mind. You will get your results back well ahead of the application submission, so you can know which schools you are competitive at. And you still have time to retake it if needed.

STEP 2: ASK YOUR MENTORS FOR LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION (JULY-AUG.)

Now is the time to start asking for LORs, before they are hit with dozens of letter requests. Schedule a time to meet with your mentor and share your goals and accomplishments. Fill them in on your volunteer activities, which they may know nothing about. Some will ask for your resume or CV when they are writing your letter, so get started on this early this year and bring it to the meeting. After talking, ask if they will give you their highest recommendation. If their answer is a wholehearted yes, thank them and ask if there is anything you can do to assist them. If their answer is not yet, ask what you can do to



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improve. If you sense any negativity, you may need to look for another letter writer. Too many applicants submit with ho-hum letters that quickly contribute to rejection.

STEP 3: ASSUME A LEADERSHIP ROLE IN A VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATION (AUG.-OCT.)

Now it's time to flex your leadership muscles. You can do so by taking on a supervisory role, a decision-making position, mentoring others, or in some way take your volunteering to the next level. It is better if you can show commitment to an organization over an extended time and discuss how you developed communication and interpersonal skills within that organization.

STEP 4: START JOURNALING (NOV.-DEC.)

You will soon be writing your personal statement and multiple secondary essays, which for many students is the hardest part of the application. Writing about yourself can make you feel vulnerable and emotional. This often makes us back off and write superficially, just when we are about to come up with something powerful. Journaling is a way to get through this part of it. Spend a few months writing for 10-20 minutes every day. You can write about your experiences, growth, and goal, or anything that comes to mind. Don't make it too difficult by expecting yourself to come up with a fully developed essay. For now, just get used to putting your ideas and thoughts down and writing about yourself. In either case, they will set the stage for the self-awareness needed to craft a great personal statement.

STEP 5: START WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT (JAN.-APRIL)

Personal narrative is a style of writing you probably didn't learn about in college. It can take several months to write a great essay, so ideally give yourself 3-4 months for writing, editing, rewriting, and polishing. You also have 15 experiences and 3 most meaningful experiences to get down, so there is a lot of writing to do in this period. Staying organized and setting mini-deadlines for yourself is the key to completing the task. (For [comprehensive primary application assistance](#), our admissions experts are here to help you.)

STEP 6: CONTRIBUTE TO RESEARCH PUBLICATIONS

Having your own study and being first author on a paper are great goals, but not always possible in college. Some students do get their names on posters or publications by working on a small team and making significant contributions to a study. While this is a nice bonus for all your hard work, it is not necessary for medical school admission. Med schools are more interested in what you did, than in what your name is on.

STEP 7: WRITE YOUR EXPERIENCES SECTION

Pay careful attention to the experiences sections. If these are written hastily or without purpose, your application is likely to come across as sloppy and disorganized. Consider each one to be a mini-essay with a beginning, middle and end. Start with the organization and your role, use the middle to create a snap-shot of your responsibilities, or preferably accomplishments, and end with sharing your sense of self-awareness.



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Look for balance across the experiences. If you talk about your leadership capabilities in one, look for examples of compassion, team-work, and communication in the others. It's okay to mention an experience that you discussed in your personal statement, but avoid repeating information. Above all, do not use this small and valuable space to describe the organization/lab/project in minute detail. Your role and how the activity contributed to you becoming a physician should be the take home message of each experience.

STEP 8: TURN IN AMCAS PRIMARY APPLICATION (MAY-JUNE)

The application usually opens in early May and you can submit about one month later. You might have heard that medical schools use a rolling application process, which means that they offer more interviews to people who apply early in the cycle. As their class fills up, they have fewer spots to fill, so the selection naturally gets more competitive. Applicants who apply early on have a better chance of getting an interview, so don't make the mistake of applying late in the cycle.

Senior Year

STEP 1: GET TO WORK ON YOUR SECONDARY APPLICATIONS (JULY-AUG.).

The key to [writing your secondary essays](#) is to stay organized. With some schools having as many as 5 essays, the number of documents can start to boggle your mind. In addition to your coursework and other obligations, the secondaries can feel like another full-time job. If you have a break over the summer, use it wisely. Create a spreadsheet of all your secondary applications, the essays, and deadlines. Decide which ones are similar enough to be used in more than one school. This is called "recycling" essays, and while it can be done effectively, it can also set you up for disaster.

Applicants have been known to submit an essay to school A with the name of school B in their essay! This will make you come across to the admissions committee as someone who does not pay attention to details, which is not the impression an aspiring doctor wants to make. Make sure you read each secondary essay you write for these kinds of errors.

Another common error is recycling an essay in a way that does not answer the question being asked. Some topics may appear similar at first glance but ask for very different approaches. In this case, recycling makes it appear as if you did not understand the question, which is never a good thing. Reread each essay prompt/question and your answer to decide if you answered the question in its entirety. Sometimes it is easier (and better) to start from scratch.

Finally, realize that secondary essays are about showing fit with the specific program sending you the secondary. Unless explicitly asked, your focus should be on "why this school?" rather than "why medicine?"

STEP 2: PREP FOR YOUR INTERVIEWS (THROUGHOUT THE YEAR)

The invites start coming for some applicants in early Fall, and for others as late as Spring. The best way to prepare for your interviews is to practice, either with your premed advisor (sometimes they offer mock interviews) or with a consultant (we offer [med school mock interviews](#)). Most applicants find that their





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first interview is the hardest, and then they get the hang of it. If your first interview happens to be at your dream school (or if it could be your only interview), do whatever it takes to prepare ahead of time.

STEP 3: KEEP YOURSELF IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

With all the writing about your past and dreaming about your future, you may find your mind wandering instead of staying where it needs to be. The ability to keep your focus on the here and now is an important skill, whether studying for an exam, caring for patients, or analyzing research data. You can practice mindfulness, meditation, or yoga if you need help in this area, but above all, practice staying present. You will find that this focus reduces your stress and improves your ability to perform.

STEP 4: RESEARCH UPDATES

The good news: You just got your name on a poster or paper!

The bad news: It's four months after you submitted your primary.

This is a great reason to send med schools an update letter, however be careful to keep it succinct. The last thing they want is another essay to read! See ["When is the best time to send a letter of interest"](#) for more information.

STEP 5: REVISIT THOSE PERSONAL INTERESTS...AND RELAX!

Speaking of stress, you are finishing college, waiting to see if you will become a doctor, anticipating a move to a new city or state, and trying to keep your grades up. All this transition can lead to a lot of stress. Remember those activities you used to do for fun? Go back and revisit them or find some new ones. If you plan to go to med school, your stress is not going away any time soon, and the sooner you find ways to reduce it, the better you will be equipped to handle new challenges. Perhaps the biggest benefit to stress reduction is that as a doctor you will soon discover the many ways that stress affects your patient's health. The most genuine way to teach others how to reduce their stress is if you've done it yourself. Practice stress reduction in your daily life and you will not regret it.

USE THE FOLLOWING TABLE TO ADAPT THE ADVICE ABOVE TO A 4-YEAR PLAN FOR YOUR NEEDS:

SENIOR YEAR	Matriculation-1 or year of application
JUNIOR YEAR	Matriculation-2 or year prior to application
SOPHOMORE YEAR	Matriculation-3 or two years prior to application
FRESHMAN YEAR	Matriculation-4 or three years prior to application





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Accepted's **expert medical school admissions consultants** can guide you through every step of this process, starting in your freshman year and working with you through your acceptance to medical school.

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GET ACCEPTED!