

MCAT WRITING SAMPLE: ADVICE AND STRATEGIES

Focus: MCAT Writing Sample

Medical schools want an assessment of your written communication skills, since this is a reflection of your ability to effectively convey information to your future patients, healthcare colleagues, and the public. This is where the Writing Sample of the MCAT comes in.

The Big Picture

You'll be writing two essays during the MCAT, each in response to a stimulus and each within a half-hour allotment. The Writing Sample is the only section that is not comprised of multiple-choice questions. Like the Verbal Reasoning section, this one tends to be underestimated by MCAT test takers. Most think that they can just apply their everyday writing skills to the MCAT and do ok on the essays. This is a dangerous presumption. In every facet, the MCAT is a test of analytical reasoning- even in the Writing Sample.

The Stimulus

The statement you're to respond to will be in the format along the lines of:

True leadership leads by example rather than by command.

It may be an opinion, a widely-shared belief, a philosophical dictum, or an assertion regarding general policy concerns in such areas as history, political science, business, ethics, or art. You can be sure that the statement will not concern scientific or technical subjects, your reasons for entering the medical profession, emotionally charged religious or social issues, or obscure social or political issues that might require specialized knowledge.

The Three-Task Essay

Though worded slightly differently each time, the instructions that follow the statement will ask you to perform three tasks. When completed properly, the following tasks create a balanced essay:

Task One: Provide your interpretation of the statement. The degree to which you develop the statement in the first task dictates the depth and sophistication of your entire essay.

Task two: Offer a concrete example that illustrates a point of view directly opposite to the one expressed or implied by the statement. You must give a counter-example; it can be factual or hypothetical.

Task three: Explain how the conflict between the view point expressed in the statement and the viewpoint you described in the second task might be resolved. You'll be coming up with a kind of rule that you could apply in situations to see whether or not the statement holds true.

Most test takers make the mistake confusing the essay stimulus as a platform from which to emote, lecture, convince, or just babble. Instead, your goal should be to analyze the statement, present it from two perspectives, and explain how and when you might apply the statement. Your essays need to be written with a critical mind. The test makers want to see how you think.

From http://www.kaplan.com/mcat/spot_writing.html

Strategies for the MCAT Writing Sample

Take ten minutes to brain storm and plan the essay before you begin to write. It may feel like you are allotting too much time to the planning, but this strategic investment will net you a large payback. You will write more quickly and more effectively as a result.

Take up each of the three tasks in the order in which they are presented. Task one asks you to explain or interpret the given statement; task two requires exploring the statement further through a contradiction or exception; and finally, task three requires resolving the apparent conflict between the statement and its contradiction. The essay will probably organize itself naturally in the shape of a thesis-antithesis-synthesis. Respond to all three tasks to receive a high score. As the MCAT student manual reminds you, in structuring the essay, do not just rely on the kind of rule-based formulas your high school composition teacher taught you. You should imagine yourself taking the subject over with your audience considering multiple viewpoints, showing an awareness of complexity rather than striving to prove a single, narrow thesis. Most likely your essay will be inductive that is, your position will build toward the end of the essay rather than being formally announced at the beginning.

1. Tips on brain storming:

- ✓ First try to paraphrase the statement in a conversational tone. This quote is really another way of saying What this quote really means is
- ✓ Ask yourself if you believe it or not (based on your experience, your conviction, your temperament, etc.) Does it ring true? Can you imagine holding the opposite position?
- ✓ Can you interpret the saying as an abbreviated version of a larger argument? What kind of value system lies behind the statement?
- ✓ Do you see the statement as being applicable in some areas but not in others? For example, true for a person in his private life but not true in public life; true for the rich but not for the poor; true for men but not for women; true for a first-world society but not true for a third-world society? How should this generalization be qualified?

2. Make sure your argument advances rather than repeats itself. Don't get bogged down reiterating the same point. Pursue the implications in your argument so your essay actually moves towards a new synthesis, not just marches in place.

3. MCAT examiners like lively, specific detail. Just because the prompt is couched as a broad generalization, don't make the mistake of conducting your argument as too abstract a level. For every general statement you make, try immediately to support it with real, specific detail. Think examples!
4. Don't underestimate the value of legible handwriting.
5. Write every day; read every day. Just like any other skill, writing gets better and easier with practice. Try writing a daily paragraph response to an editorial or news article; listen to or watch in-depth news coverage with commentary to refresh your pool of examples.

From <http://www.utexas.edu/student/lsc/handouts/1140.html>

Strategies for Structuring the Essay

The MCAT writing is basically a four paragraph essay. It is timed (1/2 hour each; 2 essays), so first draft quality is crucial.

The four paragraphs should follow this format:

Answer Task One:

- ¶ 1. Explain the overriding political/economic/social issue.
- ¶ 2. Examine a concrete example that supports the statement.

Answer Task Two:

- ¶ 3. Examine a concrete example that supports the counter-argument.

Answer Task Three:

- ¶ 4. Provide a criterion or pick a side of the argument.

My best advice: Write often and watch the clock!

From Dr. Jill DeLost (personal e-mail message of 22 Jan., 1999)

MCAT Writing Sample: Advice and Strategies

Sample Writing Prompts

Consider this statement:

In a free society individuals should be allowed to do as they want.

Write a unified essay in which you perform the following tasks:

- 1) Explain what the statement means.
- 2) Explain an example in which individuals should not be allowed to do as they want.
- 3) Decide whether or not individuals should be allowed to do as they want in a free society.

From Jill Delost (personal e-mail message of 22 Jan., 1999).

Consider this statement:

America is a perfect example of a melting pot.

Write a unified essay in which you perform the following tasks:

- 1) Explain what the statement means.
- 2) Explain why America is not a melting pot.
- 3) Determine the characteristics of a melting pot.

From Jill Delost (personal e-mail message of 22 Jan., 1999).

Your guide to the MCAT

The Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), a multiple-choice, standardized exam, is required by all but a few med schools. The test is administered by the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC) who claim that the test measures not only proficiency in the basic sciences, but also the more general problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication skills developed in humanities curricula.

Whether the MCAT actually serves this purpose—or any other—is open to debate. No matter what your opinion, though, there can be no question that your score can affect where you go to school; nearly all of the admissions officers we have surveyed place the MCAT among the top three selection factors.

The test is given twice a year: Once in April and once in August. Nearly all medical schools require the new format test. The MCAT consists of four timed sections administered over a period of more than seven hours.

The Structure of the MCAT

Section	Questions	Time (Minutes)
Verbal Reasoning	65	85
Physical Science	77	100
Essay Writing	2	60
Biological Sciences	77	100

Scoring

All four sections of the MCAT are scored. The two essays, graded together, are assigned a letter grade of J (lowest) to T (highest). The Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, and Verbal Reasoning sections are each scored on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 15 (highest). Depending on their degree of selectivity, med schools consider a score of between 8 and 1- on each of the numerically graded sections to be “superior.”

On the day on the exam, you are offered the “Score Choice” option; this allows you to see your MCAT scores before they are released to medical schools. While this is a seemingly appealing option, schools will know that you have taken the MCAT before, even if they don’t know your scores, and some will hold this against you. For more information, see [What’s the deal with Score Choice?](#)

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