



8 COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID AS A PRE-MED STUDENT





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Undergraduate years are crucial for any pre-med student. If you are headed to college knowing that you want to pursue medicine after graduating, you need to make the most of your time there. To guide you through ways to maximize your candidacy for medical school, we have outlined common mistakes you must avoid:

1 Poorly Planned Undergraduate Courses

As a pre-med student, you have several [prerequisites](#) to complete in order to apply to medical school. Different medical schools have different requirements. However, almost all MD programs expect you to cover:

- 1 year of general biology with lab
- 1 year of general chemistry with lab
- 1 year of physics
- 1 year of organic chemistry with lab

Additional prerequisites are likely to include at least 1-2 semesters of English, math (usually calculus), and sometimes statistics. For example, Harvard Medical School also requires a language, writing, or humanities course prior to admission. In order to complete all of the required courses, you must sit down with your pre-med advisor early in your undergraduate career and plan out when you will take these classes. If you start looking around your junior or senior year, it might be too late and you would have to opt for a [gap year](#) and post-bacc classes instead. This could slow down your intended timeline if you had planned to apply directly out of college.

2 Choosing the Wrong Major For You

There is a common misconception that pre-med students must be biology majors, or at least concentrate in STEM. This isn't true. Medical schools don't penalize or reward you based on your [undergraduate major](#) as long as you have completed all the prerequisite courses.

According to the AAMC, the field distribution for students who applied to medical school in 2018-2019 and the candidates who matriculated looks like this:

Major Category	Number of Applicants	Number of Matriculants
Biological Sciences	29,443	11,843
Humanities	1,689	797
Math and Statistics	353	168
Other	9,546	3,843
Physical Sciences	4,807	2,214
Social Sciences	5,143	2,107
Specialized Health Sciences	1,796	650

Unsurprisingly, more than half of the applicants were biology majors. However, there is a significant portion of students who had other majors as well. If you have another interest, you should not feel any less hopeful about your future in the field. If there's a humanities or social science subject you're interested in studying, don't let your goals of going into medicine stop you. You might have regrets later if you decide not to study English with a famous writer in college but didn't because you thought you needed to be a science major!

3 Committing to Too Many Activities

College is an exciting time and it brings the opportunity to join different student organizations. While you might be tempted to commit to 3 different dance orgs, an intramural sports team, and an a capella group, remember that you have a lot on your plate as a pre-med student. Don't overcommit yourself to an extent that you're left with no time at all in your hands for building your profile. Make sure that you leave time to take classes and labs, study for the MCAT, volunteer and research, and of course take care of yourself. Focus on depth rather than breadth.

4 Leaving Clinical Involvement and Research Until the Last Minute

Building off of the last point, it's crucial that you start working on your medical school extracurricular profile early. Since MD programs are extremely competitive, simply joining common groups such as MAPS or AMSA isn't enough. In order to impress admissions committee members, you need to maintain sustained involvement in a medical setting or toward an initiative that conveys that you have characteristics that are highly desirable in future doctors. Whether done through [clinical](#), volunteering, or [shadowing](#) experiences, make sure that you

take advantage of your time outside the classroom and pursue extracurriculars that showcase your collaboration and leadership abilities. Your goal should be to portray passion in a way that helps you stand out from other applicants. To distinguish yourself, you have to build a unique application theme and get involved in a way that aligns with that theme.

For example, if your goal as a physician is to eventually build a children's hospital in your neighborhood, the theme of your application could revolve volunteering with children, shadowing a pediatrician, and conducting research on how COVID-19 affects children in different countries. To make sure you have time for participation in different extracurriculars, you must start taking initiative while you're still a pre-med student.

5 Scheduling Your MCAT Exam Too Late

The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is a requirement for entry to all medical programs and a key component of preparing for medical school. The MCAT offers approximately 20-25 exam dates throughout the year. Dates fill up, so it is important to schedule early. You should aim to schedule your MCAT exam approximately 18 months before you plan to enroll in medical school. For pre-med students applying without a [gap year](#), this will likely be spring of their junior year. Taking it early, when you are prepared, is important because it allows you the flexibility to retake it if necessary and not have to wait for the next application cycle. You should expect to set aside about 3 months of dedicated study time before taking the exam. Do not underestimate the MCAT!

6 Not Reflecting On Reasons For Applying to Medical School

This might be difficult to hear, but you are just one out of tens of thousands of students who apply to medical school every year. Through components such as your [personal statement](#), [secondary essays](#), and [interviews](#), you must articulate why you are passionate about medicine and how you hope to contribute to the field. Your pre-med life is a good time to reflect on your reasoning behind pursuing medicine. If you don't know now why you've chosen this career path and are devoting so much time preparing for medical school, you won't be able to write a compelling personal statement, and it'll all have been a waste of time. So think carefully about your reasoning and understand why the medical profession is your calling.

7 Not Taking Advantage of College Resources

If you know you want to be pre-med, you hopefully chose a college with a strong record for medical school acceptance after graduation. This means that your college is likely to have a strong pre-med advising team. A common mistake many students make is not consulting their advisors as much as they could. These advisors are there to help guide you through any

questions you have, whether it's on class schedule, MCAT preparation, or helping connect with local hospitals or organizations for clinical or volunteering work.

Most colleges also provide [research opportunities](#) specifically for students interested in medicine. Reach out to one of your science professors and ask them about openings for research assistant positions at their lab or within the department. If you give them a clear idea of your interests — and specify that you wish to go to medical school — they could have a position or project that might perfectly fit the bill. If not, they may connect you with other professors or researchers who have openings on their teams. Almost every student brings lab experience as part of their medical school application, so don't miss out on a chance to network with a professor and work in the lab.

8 Forgetting About Letters of Recommendation

Many of your professors will also be the people you turn to for your medical school letters of recommendation. Because you will need these regardless of which school you apply to, it's important to build connections with your professors — and not just your STEM instructors. While it's definitely important to show your skills in the hard sciences, you should also demonstrate that you've excelled in various academic domains, have succeeded as an employee, and more. Ideally, you should aim to request medical school letters of recommendation from:

- 2 science professors
- A non-science professor
- A research supervisor if applicable
- An employer if you have been out of school for a significant period of time

Of course, you must choose professors who have actually taught you. Don't just go up to a faculty member at your college who's a renowned scientist but knows nothing about you. These letters exist to provide accurate reflections of your presence in classroom or work settings. If the person doesn't know you well, they won't be able to say anything substantial! If you know that you want to apply to medical school soon after college, pinpoint professors you'll want as your recommenders. Attend office hours regularly, talk to them about your interests and goals, and keep in touch throughout your college career. As for when to officially ask them, don't leave the asking until the last minute. Give them at least 1 month prior to the due date - if you plan to [submit your AMCAS](#) application in the first week of June, ask them for the letter no later than May 1. Email or hop on the phone with them and ask if they can meet to discuss your medical school application.

Once you start working on your application, review this list to make sure you're avoiding all of these errors. Crafting a successful application requires a significant amount of time, but if you plan ahead, you will avoid key mistakes and increase your chances of getting in.