

## The Top 5 Ways to Improve Your CARS Score Today

For most pre-meds taking the MCAT, the CARS section proves to be one of the biggest obstacles standing between them and admission to the medical school of their dreams. The CARS section is a highly artificial environment, unlike any test you've ever taken before. It can be difficult to know where to begin and what steps to take to improve your overall CARS approach. Everyone and their mother seem to have an opinion about how to do well on the CARS section, opinions that often contradict each other as often as they agree. To make matters worse, unlike the other sections of the MCAT which play to the inherent strengths of pre-meds, hardly anyone starts off with a CARS score in range of where they'd like to be on test day. Fear sets in, and the "you're not going to get in" gremlins start chanting their mean-spirited slogans; all because of one stinking section.

My goal for this article is to offer five easily actionable steps you can take today to start to improve your CARS score. While there is no silver-bullet for the CARS, we think these five tips will help anyone on their journey to getting the score they want. Let's get to it!

### Tip 1: Take Three Deep Breaths Before Each Passage

This is one of the easiest things you can do to put yourself in the best frame of mind before each passage. Not only will it help mitigate the anxiety that builds as one takes the MCAT, but it also clears one's mental RAM from the previous passage. Whether you did well or terrible, the last passage is done and over. If you have time at the end, maybe you'll go back, but regardless, you need to have a clear mind and let go of the previous passage, so you are prepared to face the next one. Anyone who has ever taken a CARS practice test knows how easy it is to read one or two paragraphs and then realize that you didn't understand or retain anything. Then you have to go back, waste time, and re-read the passage. On top of it all, then you start kicking yourself for having made such a "huge" mistake. Taking three deep breaths before each passage significantly decreases the likelihood of you mindlessly reading and also triggers the body's natural relaxation response which can help reduce anxiety and the mental fog and distractions that go along with it.



### Tip 2: Pacing is Everything: Use Correct Passage Timing

Timing and pacing are the two biggest ingredients in a top-tier CARS score. It doesn't really matter how well you read, analyze, or answer questions if your timing is off. If you have to rush through the last two or three passages, it will be exceedingly difficult if not near impossible to score in the 128+ range. Thus, we believe that from day one of your CARS preparations, you have to first and foremost be focused on your timing. So what does this mean?

1. Always do your practice passages under timed conditions. How well you can answer an untimed passage is of little value in preparing you for the CARS section. The only thing it succeeds in doing is over-inflating your confidence.
2. Use the correct timing intervals when doing practice passages. Some people think, “Well, there are nine passages, and since there are ninety minutes for the section, I have ten minutes to spend on each passage.” This is a very bad idea because it does not allow you to build your CARS pacing intuition.

CARS passages have either 5, 6, or 7 questions associated with them. Let’s assume you give yourself 4 minutes to read each passage. With 10 minutes total per passage, this leaves 6 minutes for answering questions. For a five question passage, you can spend 72 seconds on each question (6 minutes/ 5 questions) and still be on track to finish the test on time. But for a six question passage, you only have 60 seconds (6 minutes/ 6 questions). Even worse, for a seven question passage, you have just 51 seconds (6 minutes/ 7 questions).

*(4 minutes per passage x 9 passages = 36 minutes for reading passages)*

Hopefully, it’s clear how confusing this can be if you treat each passage the same. If you answered all of the questions on the CARS at a 5 question passage rate (36 minutes for reading passages + 63.5 minutes for answering questions), it would take you 99.5 minutes to complete the test, 9 minutes over what you’re given. In contrast, if you answered all of the questions on the CARS at a 7 question passage rate (36 minutes for reading passages + 45 minutes for answering questions) it would take you only 81 minutes to complete the test, leaving 9 minutes on the table that you could have used to improve your score. We’re going through all of this to show how important it is that you answer questions at the correct pace. A one size fit all approach to timing does not work.

90 minutes total for the CARS section – 36 minutes for reading passages = 54 minutes for answering questions. This breaks down to a little over a minute per question. Thus,

For a passage with 5 questions, (4 minutes for reading the passage + 5 minutes for questions) give yourself **9 Minutes**

For a passage with 6 questions (4 minutes for reading the passage + 6.5 minutes for questions) give yourself **10.5 Minutes**

For a passage with 7 questions (4 minutes for reading the passage + 8 minutes for questions) give yourself **12 Minutes**

### Tip 3: Practice Letting Go of Hard Questions

I once heard someone say, “*The question that will keep you out of medical school is not the one you get wrong, it’s the question you spend too much time on.*” Because we feel like our lives depend on getting every question right on the MCAT, we often end up being “hypervigilant” which causes us to obsess about hard questions and spend too much time checking and rechecking our answers. This hypervigilance can lead to serious timing issues. Imagine you spend 5 minutes on each of three hard

questions in the first seven passages. Instead of spending roughly 4 or 5 minutes on these three questions as you should have, you've spent 15 minutes. Now, just because of three questions, you're 10 minutes behind (an entire 6 question passage). Even if you had perfect pacing for the rest of the test, instead of missing 2 or 3 really hard questions (likely some of the hardest on the test anyways) you've probably thrown away 6 to 8 of the last 12 questions because you didn't give yourself enough time to get to them. Don't let this happen to you!



We recently analyzed the raw score conversions of the AAMC's scored Practice Exam 1, and the results were pretty surprising. You could miss 10 questions on the CARS and still score a 128. (*While raw score conversions will fluctuate depending on your test date, the point still stands.*) You can let go of some of the hard questions on the CARS and still do very well! Practice doing the following:

1. The first time you think to yourself, "I'm spending a lot of time on this question" look at the clock and give yourself 30 more seconds.
2. Eliminate any answer choices you can.
3. After 30 seconds, guess, mark the question for review later, and tell yourself "I'll come back to this question once I get the easy ones."
4. If you do this, *you will have time at the end of the test to come back*, and sometimes, having cleared your head, you'll see the question anew and what you were missing on your first try.

#### Tip 4: Don't Start Reviewing Practice Tests or Passages Too Early

One of the biggest mistakes I see pre-meds make when studying for the CARS section is to spend too much time, too early, reviewing practice tests or passages. If you're rushing through the last three passages (roughly 18 questions) and missing half of them, even if you score 75% correct on the other 35 questions (26 questions correct) you're going to have a scaled score of around 124 (35 questions correct). If you could just get your timing down and not be forced to rush on those last three passages, you wouldn't even have to improve your overall CARS percentage correct to get into the 126 and 127 range (39 questions to 41 questions correct).

After finishing a passage or practice test, it's ok to spend a little time looking over the questions you thought were really hard and the wrong answers you thought you should have gotten right, but you're far better off spending two hours doing another 12 passages than doing a deep review of only 2 or 3. While it's heresy for some: ***Until, you're able to consistently finish your CARS passages on time, without rushing; you shouldn't be reviewing passages. Instead, you should be doing more***

**passages.** Once you get your timing down, then review as much as you want. But timing has to come first!

Don't waste time reviewing passages until:

- You are consistently finishing your passages without rushing.
- You are consistently finishing your passages without staring at the clock to regulate whether you should speed up or slow down. (*We are trying to build your CARS pacing intuition which does not mean staring at the clock all the time*).
- You are consistently letting go of hard questions without getting snagged by them and thus wasting precious time.

### Tip 5: Stair Step Your CARS Practice

Many people begin their CARS preparations by taking a full-length CARS practice test. They try to take 9 passages in 90 minutes and most frequently end up not getting to the last passage or two, feeling rushed and exhausted by the end. They then are subsequently devastated by their score and thus begin their foray into preparing for the CARS section with a great deal of discouragement and disappointment. It doesn't have to be this way.



As I said before, the CARS section is unlike anything you've ever done before, so it's far better to ease yourself into it and build up over time than trying to start at max force. The CARS section is like a marathon and in this regard, it will eat up and spit out anyone who just tries to get up one day off the couch and run 26.2 miles. By giving yourself plenty of time to prepare for the CARS, you'll be able to do more passages and also acclimate to each new stair step of difficulty and required stamina before pushing on to the next. This is a general principle that can be used by anyone that is four weeks out or more from their test date, but for those of you who have more time, try something like this:

**Week 1:** Do one passage per day at the recommended timing intervals, timing each passage separately.

**Week 2:** Do two passages per day at the recommended timing intervals, timing each passage separately.

**Week 3:** Do three passages per day at the recommended timing intervals, timing each passage separately.

**Week 4:** Do four passages per day at the recommended timing intervals, doing the passages in two, two passage blocks. (e.g. If Passage 1 has 5 questions and Passage 2 has 6 questions, give yourself a total of 19.5 minutes to complete both. Repeat for the second block of passages.)

**Week 5:** Do six passages per day at the recommended timing intervals, doing the passages in two, three passage blocks.

**Week 6:** Do eight passages per day at the recommended timing intervals, doing the passages in two, four passage blocks.

**Week 7 & Onward:** Do a full-length practice test every other day, reviewing the previous day's test on your off days.

And that's it! We hope that you will find some of these ideas useful for your CARS preparations. Start implementing these changes today and you'll be on the road to the CARS score you need to get into the school you want!

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