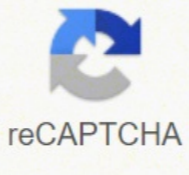




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## How to prepare for dentistry

June 14, 2021 June 14, 2021/ Dr. Shemmassian learn how to get into dental school The road to becoming a dentist is long, not only in terms of years, but also in regard to the number of hoops you'll need to jump through. There's a seemingly never-ending list of dental school requirements to meet, including taking certain prerequisites, achieving a high GPA and strong DAT score, dental volunteering, community service, and so on. But it's not just about checking a bunch of boxes informed by reading generic guides on how to get into dental school. You have to do things well to impress admissions committees, especially to get accepted to the best dental programs. Otherwise, you risk being seen as a clichéd pre-dental student. Plus, it's not like you have tons of free time to tackle everything. Dental school prerequisites alone demand significant attention. Therefore, efficiency is key during your undergraduate years, and perhaps beyond. You'll need to know where to focus and where not to spend too much time. Many pre-dental students struggle with the latter. It's easy to look around at what everyone else is doing and think that you need to take the same courses during certain terms and participate in the same extracurriculars for dental school. But what if your peers are approaching things the wrong way? And what if following others' lead will make you look like everyone else? How will you stand out from the pack? If you're a busy pre-dental student who wonders not only about dental school requirements, but also about how to thoughtfully approach the various components, read on. This guide is for you. There's no single formula or process to follow in order to get accepted to dental school. The steps to take depend on where you are in your journey towards dentistry, whether you're a high school student, a college senior, or a nontraditional applicant looking to change careers. If you're still in high school, we suggest you start by reading our guide on how to become a dentist, which provides an overview of the admissions process ahead of you and ways you can begin preparing in high school. For nontraditional applicants, we'll discuss admissions strategies specific to you in Part 3 of this guide. While the following section provides a four-year timeline for pre-dental college students, the information given is relevant to all applicants. You can use the suggestions and milestones below to help you plan your path to dental school, wherever you may be in that process. Freshman and sophomore year of college Below are our recommendations for what to focus on during the two years preceding your pre-application year: 1. Get good grades. Whether you're majoring in the sciences or not, your freshman and sophomore GPAs count toward your application. Excel all around and develop long-term, good study habits. 2. Develop a plan and timeline for covering DAT topics and taking the DAT. Most students take the DAT between the summer after their sophomore year and the summer after junior year. Dental school applications open in late May/early June, so if you're applying straight from college, the DAT should be completed by the end of June of your application year. That said, you can begin working on your application and even submit it without your DAT scores, but schools will not consider the application complete until the scores are received. To succeed on the DAT, you'll want to have completed both general chemistry and organic chemistry, as well as your general biology coursework. Additional classes that can be beneficial include molecular and cell biology, human anatomy and physiology, biochemistry, mathematics, zoology, evolutionary biology, genetics and physics. We also recommend taking a practice DAT by your sophomore year to gauge your strengths and weaknesses, and to determine where additional coursework might help supplement your knowledge. 3. Connect with the pre-dental advising office. Not every college or university has a specific pre-dental advisor; however, most schools have some type of pre-professional advising available. Use this office as a resource to help you determine your major or connect with alumni in the dental field. 4. Join the pre-dental club. Many colleges and universities have a dedicated pre-dental club that provides opportunities for exposure to dentists and the dental profession. In addition to using the club to meet working dentists, you might enjoy leading the club—a great extracurricular experience—or founding one, if it doesn't already exist. 5. Participate in meaningful pre-dental extracurriculars. The majority of extracurricular activities included on your dental school application will be pulled from experiences during your undergraduate years. It is not advisable to include high school experiences on your application. Many students wonder which extracurriculars are most important for getting accepted to dental school. Having an understanding of the specific ADEA AADSAS application format can help you choose the most meaningful extracurricular activities that can strengthen your application. The dental school application has a section for "supporting information" that includes specific categories of extracurriculars with descriptions. Below we provide the descriptions as they appear on the dental application along with recommendations for how you can approach each type of activity. Academic enrichment Description: "Programs sponsored by colleges, universities, or other not-for-profit organizations; for example, Summer Medical and Dental Education Program and Summer Health Professions Education Program." Recommendation: Many dental schools offer enrichment programs ranging from one day to several months. The American Dental Education Association has a calendar of enrichment programs and events that can help you identify different opportunities. Plus, many dental schools offer several pre-dental days throughout the year where you have the opportunity to interact with students, learn about the school, meet faculty and administration and even work in a dental school simulation lab using a real handpiece to drill on fake teeth. Seek these out! Dental experience Description: "Either paid or unpaid work in a dental field where you observed patient care (i.e., shadowing), interacted with practitioners, or had responsibility for patient care." Recommendation: Most dental schools require shadowing or work experience in the dental field, and you are required to report your total number of hours. You'll need to include the specific office or dentist as well as contact information for every shadowing or work experience, so be sure to track your experiences and hours. Some schools do not list a minimum number of hours while others have a specific requirement, ranging from 30 to 100 hours for the vast majority of schools. We recommend getting at least 150 hours of dental experience to be competitive, which should include hours spent in a general dentist's office and in at least one specialist's office. Be sure to check with the specific schools you are interested in to understand their requirements. Employment Description: "Paid work done outside of the dental field or a research lab; for example, a retail or restaurant job." Recommendation: Past employment may be more important for nontraditional applicants discussed later. But if you're applying from undergrad, anything will do here—work-study, a gig waiting tables or serving as a counselor at summer camp, etc. Extracurricular activities Description: "Related activities you would like your selected programs to review; for example, academic clubs and competitive teams. Do not include paid work experience in this section." Recommendation: As you've surely heard before, while applying to colleges and the like, you should seek opportunities to lead, not just participate, and find at least three meaningful extracurricular activities that also demonstrate your leadership abilities. More than anything, you want to show that you'll not only be a good and dedicated dentist, but that you're preparing yourself to be able to manage a staff in a practice or work well with others. So even something like the track team could be relevant to your career in dentistry, whether or not it seems immediately salient. Research Description: "Any experience working on a research project, preferably in addition to or outside of regular classroom work. This may include student research positions, research technician positions, summer research student, master's rotational student, etc." Recommendation: Getting your name on a meaningful publication in any field of research—especially in health or the biological sciences—is ideal, although not always possible. We recommend obtaining at least six months of research experience with the same faculty member or lab. Again, this demonstrates a preparedness for the science curriculum that awaits you in dental school. Research "requirements" can be confusing and stressful for applicants, so we want to draw your attention to this note from the ADEA website: "Research experience is not a requirement for admission to dental school, but may add an extra layer to your application if the institutions you are applying to have a research focus, or if you are particularly interested in research. Most schools recognize that it is not possible for all students to have research experience prior to dental school, as not all undergraduate institutions have research opportunities available to students. You should do research if you are interested by it, not solely to enhance your application to dental school. While many students think that lab research is most important, experience with social science research is just as fascinating and valuable." (Suggested reading: How to Write a Great Research Assistant Cover Letter) Volunteer Description: "Volunteer work done outside of the dental field; for example, working for Habitat for Humanity, tutoring students, participating in or working for a fundraiser walk or blood drive, etc." Recommendation: At least three non-dental volunteer and community service activities. ADEA provides the following six opportunities as suggestions: Habitat for Humanity College clubs and service organizations Church involvement Community centers Soup kitchens Homeless shelters 6. Work in a dental office or become a dental assistant. One of the best ways to know if you like something is to try it out. It is possible to get hired part-time into a dental office in a variety of different roles from working at the front desk to becoming a dental assistant. Every state has its own laws and regulations governing dental assistants and in many states, on-the-job training is all that is required. Check the Dental Assisting National Board website to see requirements in your state. If you do live in a state that requires licensure, you can find dental assisting programs as short as eight weeks. As you begin talking to dentists, ask if they have any need of help in their office. This first-hand experience will be extremely helpful when writing your personal statement and interviewing for dental school, and it shows dental admissions committees that you are committed to the field of dentistry. If you're not planning to take a gap year, junior year is critical in the dental school application process. This is often the year in which students take the DAT, manage a heavy load of upper division science courses, write their personal statement, and complete their AADSAS application. All of this must happen on top of maintaining strong grades, continuing extracurricular activities, and finding meaningful dental experiences through shadowing or work. Additionally, outlined below are key milestones often completed during junior year: 1. Take the DAT. Most students need somewhere between two and six months of preparation in order to do well on the DAT. There are many resources both in person and online to help you prepare for the DAT. Be sure to create a detailed study plan and be disciplined in your approach and preparation. Remember, ideally you will want to take the DAT no later than late June of your application year in order to get your application submitted in time to be considered for the first round of interview offers in September and October. 2. Request letters of recommendation. Reach out to potential recommenders no later than three months before your target application submission date. So, if you plan to submit your application on June 1st when application submissions begin, you'll want to secure your references by March 1st. The AADSAS allows you to submit up to four letters of recommendation, including individual letters of recommendation and composite/committee letters. In the past, composite/committee letters took the place of three individual letters; however, composite/committee letters count as one letter as of the 2021–2022 application cycle. Check the requirements for each dental school to which you plan to apply, as each school has its own criteria regarding what kinds of letters are needed. (Suggested reading: Dental School Letters of Recommendation: The Ultimate Guide) 3. Draft your personal statement. Begin brainstorming and writing your personal statement six months before applying. While the personal statement is relatively short (4,500 characters including spaces), it can take several months to produce a high-quality statement. Aim to have a first draft of your personal statement completed by April of your application year so you have sufficient time to edit and revise before submitting in June or July. (Suggested reading: Dental School Personal Statement: The Ultimate Guide) 4. Take the Casper test (optional). A handful of dental schools require Casper, a situational judgment test that evaluates traits like professionalism, ethics, communication, and empathy, among others. Some schools may also ask you to complete Snapshot, a video response tool that accompanies Casper as part of a trio of assessments called Altus Suite (the third component of Altus Suite, Duet, isn't relevant to dental schools). If you're applying to dental schools that require Casper, you should plan to register for the test in April or May and take it no later than late June. You want your scores to reach schools by the time that you submit your AADSAS application, a process that generally takes 2–3 weeks, so work backwards from when you aim to submit your AADSAS application in order to determine your ideal test date. For those who want to submit AADSAS as early as possible (June 1st), Casper should be completed by early May. Here's a list of dental schools that require Casper (current as of June 2021): For more information on preparing for Casper and Snapshot, check out the following guides: How to Prepare for the Casper Test and Casper Snapshot and Duet: Everything You Need to Know. Because Casper began as a medical school admissions tool, these guides were written with med school applicants in mind. Nevertheless, 100 percent of the advice in them applies to the dental school admissions process as well. 5. Complete the AADSAS application and supplemental applications. The AADSAS application opens on May 11th, with submissions beginning on June 1st. You can use the interim few weeks to prepare, review, and perfect your application prior to submission. (Note that, if you're applying to dental schools in Texas, you'll need to submit those applications through the Texas Medical & Dental Schools Application Service (TMDSAS), which has its own timeline. The TMDSAS application opens on May 3rd, and you can submit your application beginning on May 17th. Make sure to review the TMDSAS website to ensure that you understand what other unique requirements the TMDSAS application process holds.) Most dental schools review applications on a rolling basis, which means that applications are reviewed as they are received. It's therefore very helpful to get your application in as early as possible, before interview slots fill up. Set a goal and develop a timeline that will enable you to submit your AADSAS application by no later than July 15th of your application summer. In addition to your AADSAS application that can be sent to all dental schools you apply to, each individual dental school will have a supplemental application. In some instances, this means simply paying an additional fee and answering a few basic questions. Most schools, however, also require several additional essays. The earlier you submit your AADSAS application, the earlier you can begin working on these supplemental applications. Traditionally, ADEA provides a yearly list of all dental schools and whether or not they require a supplemental application. Reference this list early. (Note: The most recent "supplemental report" published by the ADEA applies to the 2019–2020 application year. You can use this report as a baseline, but be sure to cross reference the information with individual dental schools' websites. We will update this guide when a new report is available.) Senior year of college (application year) 1. Dental school interviews. You should plan to attend interviews during the fall and early winter of your application year—in some cases, in the middle of your senior year. Most schools start interviewing in September and can continue interviewing as late as the following April. However, because dental schools typically have rolling admissions, you ideally want to have a strong application that gets you invited to interviews in September, October, and November. This is when schools tend to invite the strongest candidates who have the greatest chances of being admitted. (Suggested reading: How to Ace Your Dental School Interview) 2. Decide where to attend dental school. December 1st, or as it is sometimes called, "Decision Day," is traditionally the first day that dental schools begin sending letters of acceptance. Note that, according to the ADEA, if December 1st falls on a weekend, applicants should instead expect to hear back on the following Monday. Many dental schools send out emails with admissions notifications throughout the day on December 1st. Some dental schools make personal phone calls to students to extend offers of admission. Others still use snail mail. Check your junk mail and clear out your voicemail so you are prepared to receive these offers. If you do not hear from any schools on December 1st, it doesn't mean that your dream of dental school is over. Most dental schools do not fill their entire class on Decision Day and will continue extending interviews and offering admissions until they have a full class. Most programs continue sending offers into March or even April as waitlists move and students admitted to multiple programs make their choices. Bottom line: while it is ideal to receive that offer on December 1st, it can still happen later. Finally, once you receive an offer, you typically have 30 days to respond. Most schools require a financial deposit, usually between \$500 and \$1000, to secure your seat in the class. If you get your offer in January, February or March, you may have only 10 days to confirm your spot. Have a very clear sense of your top choices so you can prioritize and make a quick decision. If you've got an offer, but not from your top school, pay up and reserve your seat at your lower-choice school, and then wait and hope to hear back from your top program. If you get a yes from your dream school later, you can always change your mind—but you will lose the deposit. Paying a three- or four-figure sum to ensure a safety net is probably smart. According to a 2011 article in the Journal of Dental Education, nearly 80 percent of dental school enrollees in 2009 were between the ages of 22 and 25. The majority of these students would be considered "traditional," meaning that they followed a pre-dental path through undergrad and applied to dental school either during their senior year or after taking a gap year. However, according to the same study, 6.5 percent of dental school enrollees were over the age of 30. Nontraditional applicants typically made the decision to go into dentistry near the end of, or after completing, their undergraduate studies, and often even after starting careers in completely different fields. Below are a few examples of applicants who would be considered nontraditional: Juan started off college as a premed but after shadowing a physician, he quickly decided that medicine was not for him and became a business major. During his senior year, he had a pre-dental roommate who introduced him to dentistry. Eliana is a 24-year-old dental hygienist without a bachelor's degree. After five years spent working in a dental office, she has decided to go to dental school. James is a 27-year-old investment banker. After several years of working long hours, he has decided he wants to make a change to pursue a career that maintains his high earning potential but provides a better work-life balance that's more amenable to starting a family. Certainly, these represent only a few examples of nontraditional applicants and there are hundreds of other stories that qualify as nontraditional paths into dentistry. The pre-dental track can be grueling for "traditional" applicants but poses additional challenges for nontraditional students. While many of the steps are the same as they are for traditional applicants, the greatest challenges come in developing your own unique timeline outside of the typical four-year college plan. Reference the information outlined above for traditional applicants as well as the summary of key milestones below: 1. Familiarize yourself with dental school requirements and prerequisite coursework. As a nontraditional applicant, you do not have the advantage of spending your undergraduate years preparing for dental school applications. A good place to start is to review the information regarding requirements provided above in this blog as well as the ADEA AADSAS website in order to understand the application process and develop a plan to complete the requirements. 2. Complete the dental school prerequisites. The prerequisite courses are often the most challenging aspect for nontraditional applicants, especially those who are currently working and unable to be full-time students. If you already have a bachelor's degree, prerequisites can be completed in as little as two years; however, a three-year plan is more reasonable. When making your plan, you should map out your chemistry courses, as you will need two semesters of general chemistry followed by two semesters of organic chemistry. Remember that physics is not on the DAT, so it can be taken after you submit your application and are going through the interview process. 3. Take the DAT. Develop a specific plan and timeline to take the DAT. You can take the DAT as late as the summer in which you plan to apply, but remember that, due to rolling admissions, you ideally want your application completed and submitted by mid-July. You may submit the rest of your application prior to completing the DAT, however most schools will not consider it complete until they receive your scores, which can take up to six weeks after you take the DAT. 4. Get dental experience. Some nontraditional applicants come from dental backgrounds, such as having worked as a dental hygienist or dental assistant, and will therefore have more than sufficient experience in the dental field. If this is not you, find opportunities to shadow a dentist or work in a dental office. You could work as a receptionist in the front office or become a dental assistant in relatively little or no time depending on the state in which you live. 5. Leverage your background. As a nontraditional applicant, you will, by definition, have a unique background compared to most applicants who followed a traditional path into dental school. Do not shy away from your background, and instead find ways to highlight the experiences you gained and the added clarity you now have in regards to why you want to pursue a degree in dentistry. If approached methodically, your application can demonstrate your increased maturity and life experience, which will likely impress admissions committees and provide interesting material to discuss during your interviews. If you didn't get into dental school despite applying the previous cycle, review your application with a critical eye to find ways to strengthen potential areas of weakness and increase your chances of getting into dental school the second time around. Use that additional year to bolster any areas of your application that may have held you back. For example, if your DAT score was below average, it would be a good investment to retake the DAT and improve your score. If you did not have extensive dental experience, try to find a job working in a dental office. If your GPA is low, consider enrolling in a pre-dental-specific post-baccalaureate program. Finally, write a completely new personal statement and incorporate elements and experiences learned during your additional year. Do whatever you can to strengthen your application, as this will help demonstrate to admissions committees your commitment to becoming a dentist. (Suggested reading: How Hard Is It to Get Into Dental School?) Final thoughts The application process to dental school can appear daunting due to the significant work and effort required. However, it's worth it when you receive an offer of admission to the dental school of your dreams. To maximize your chances of admissions success, make a plan that ensures that you earn strong grades and a great DAT score, gain relevant dental experiences, and write high quality dental school application essays—and then stick with it. Before you know it, you'll have the letters DDS or DMD after your name.

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