

Book Review

■ MCAT Verbal Reasoning Mastery: The Complete Reading Comprehension Program

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Charles A. Chaney

Reviewed by Ruth O. Bingham, Ph.D.

In *MCAT Verbal Reasoning Mastery: The Complete Reading Comprehension Program*, Charles A. Chaney opines that the Verbal Reasoning (VR) section of the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is both the most feared (p.7) and the most difficult (p.27). When he polled students in 2007, Chaney found that “89% of students voted Verbal Reasoning to be the most difficult section to improve” (p.27).

Chaney argues that VR is also the most important section (p.27) and summarizes why pre-med students should take the time and effort necessary to develop these skills: “Verbal Reasoning measures your ability to understand, evaluate, and apply information based on facts and arguments. Every future physician should have no trouble doing this.... [VR] also measures to some extent your future success in understanding the material that will be covered in medical school” (p.30).

Nonetheless, Chaney points out that preparation material for VR has been much more limited than for the biological and physical sciences sections (p.23), and a review of other MCAT resources

seems to support that: Even in AAMC’s *The Official Guide to the MCAT Exam* (2009 Edition), the VR section is covered in 59 pages, compared to 118 for the physical sciences and 123 for the biological

Why the disparity? The physical and biological sciences sections test knowledge and the application of knowledge, whereas the verbal reasoning section tests skills. Thus, for example, the mechanics/physics of a bicycle can be learned relatively quickly through study, but riding the bicycle requires regular practice over time to become proficient, and describing how to acquire a skill is notoriously difficult.

Much of the usual advice on preparing for the VR is either too general to be helpful (e.g., read a lot) or disputed (e.g., always/never read the questions first), and although Chaney also offers general tips, including reading a lot and not checking the questions first, his focus is to “teach extensive reading techniques, provide advice from top performers, and map out training programs specifically aimed at maximizing performance” (p.xiv).

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Chaney achieves all three goals, including myriad tips in the process, including the “Elevens for the Wise” — lists of false assumptions about VR, things to do on test day, and ways to reduce anxiety.

Perhaps most gratifying, Chaney gives readers a realistic appraisal of what it takes to significantly improve a VR score: i.e., six to eight months of focused reading, two to three hours each day.

If that seems an unrealistic commitment for full-time students, it is not as unrealistic as the widespread belief among students that it is possible to make up for years of poor reading in the weeks before the MCAT. Chaney’s book comes as welcome support for what pre-health advisors have been telling students for years.

After eight chapters, Chaney arrives at his focal contribution, which he calls “Neuro-Visual Programming” (NVP) and describes as “a method of training the brain to visualize in great detail the meaning of what the eyes read” (p.135). The goal is to improve memory and comprehension so that reading passages once through is sufficient, thus eliminating the constant back-and-forth between passages and questions that requires so much time.

Simply put, NVP is a visualizing mnemonic device: mentally using colors, shapes, symbols, people, animals, and objects to represent meaning in the texts being read. When using NVP, readers create imaginary three-dimensional “mental arenas” then populate those spaces with graphic mental images, using one arena per paragraph of text. While some symbols are intuitive, such as a line showing a connection between two items, others are creative, even fanciful, as with a ten-foot tall wobbling note signifying “strangely moving melodies.”

Attempting to summarize NVP here risks doing it a disservice — the explanation should be read in its entirety. Because of the mountain of evidence showing that mnemonic devices do improve mental focus and recall, readers can reasonably assume the technique is effective. Chaney does not delve into that evidence, but instead offers the improvement in his own VR score (from 6 to 11) as evidence.

As with all skills, the efficacy of NVP depends largely on the regular, disciplined practice of it. With good reason, Chaney forewarns that his method “requires

significant practice to master,” and although it is tempting to quote his warning that skipping two days puts one a full week behind (p.136) in order to scare students into diligence, the claim would be difficult to believe without some evidence.

Chaney admits that NVP has elements of “teaching to the test” in the sense that few people would use it in normal reading but points out that it also teaches an essential life skill: one of training the mind to focus and recall on demand and to actively engage when interest does not flow naturally.

Whether or not students have the diligence to master NVP, MCAT Verbal Reasoning Mastery will nonetheless prove helpful in many ways.

Part I (Chapters 1-3) provides a more accurate overview of the MCAT and description of the VR section than most MCAT prep books, many of which still contain errors from over-hasty editing following the change to computer-based testing. Parts II and III (Chapters 4-9) provide the main instruction, including descriptions of VR passages, eight types of questions, and strategies for answering them. Of particular help for students are the chapters on poor reading habits and reasons for answering questions incorrectly, which are much more extensive than in most such books.

Part IV (Chapters 10-12) lays out detailed reading programs and includes a chapter of interviews with students who performed well on VR. The interviews are not testimonials — none of them mentions NVP, just candid explanations of their experience. Part V (Chapters 13-15) consists of the “Elevens” lists mentioned above, and Part VI, 140 pages of exercises, divided into ten units.

To any student who struggles with reading or VR, MCAT Verbal Reasoning Mastery will probably look daunting — over 400 pages! — but advisors can reassure students: each page has a lot of white space, so the text looks clear, concepts are easily identified, and pages pass quickly.

Also, students who are unsure about committing to learning NVP can be encouraged by knowing that, although skilled readers might find NVP cumbersome, they are likely already using something similar, even if subconsciously. What makes this book unique is that NVP gives students who are struggling access to the

mental processes of skilled readers, thereby allowing students to change how they read, instead of simply doing more of what they are not doing well.

MCAT Verbal Reasoning Mastery is a much-needed and long-overdue resource, not just for students facing the MCAT, but also for pre-health advisors who now have something to offer beyond the usual advice to “read a lot.”

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