

FREE RESOURCE

# How to Build a Competitive Pre-Dental Application

GPA, DAT, shadowing hours, and what committees actually look for.

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01



# The Four Pillars

Dental school admissions committees are not just looking for the highest numbers — they are looking for evidence that you can handle the academic rigor AND become a clinician patients trust. Every application is evaluated across four pillars:

Academics	Clinical Exposure	Character	Communication
GPA + DAT scores. Both overall and science GPA matter. Trends matter too — going up is a positive signal.	Shadowing hours with a licensed dentist. Committees want to see you understand what the job actually is.	Who you are outside of grades. Service, leadership, resilience. Especially relevant if numbers are borderline.	Your personal statement and interview. Can you articulate why dentistry, and why now?

02



# GPA Benchmarks

Most accredited dental schools use these general thresholds as a starting filter:

## 3.5+ Overall GPA

This is the national average for matriculants. Scoring above this puts you in a competitive range. Anything below 3.2 will require strong compensating factors.

## 3.4+ Science GPA

Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Math (BCPM) are weighted heavily. A strong science GPA signals you can handle pre-clinical coursework.

## Upward Trends Matter

A 3.3 that trended from 2.8 freshman year to 3.7 senior year tells a very different story than a flat 3.3. Committees read the trajectory.

# If Your GPA Is Low

A low GPA is not automatic rejection — it requires a strategy:

- Take additional upper-division science courses and ace them
- Consider a post-baccalaureate program designed for dental applicants
- Address the GPA directly in your personal statement — own it, explain it, show growth
- A strong DAT (20+ AA) can help offset GPA concerns
- Apply to schools with holistic review policies
- DO NOT retake courses you earned a C in just to replace the grade — this rarely improves perception and many schools average repeated courses

03



## DAT Score Breakdown

Academic Average (AA)	<b>20+</b>	Composite of all sections. Most schools screen here first.
Perceptual Ability (PAT)	<b>20+</b>	Spatial reasoning. Unique to dental admissions. Practice heavily.
Biology	<b>19–20+</b>	Biggest section. Requires systematic coverage — do not rely on memorization alone.
General Chemistry	<b>19–20+</b>	Strong overlap with MCAT prep if applicable.
Organic Chemistry	<b>18–20+</b>	Mechanisms over memorization. Most students find this the hardest.
Reading Comprehension (RC)	<b>20+</b>	Active reading strategies matter more than background knowledge.
Quantitative Reasoning (QR)	<b>19+</b>	Basic math and statistics. Most students find this most approachable.

04



# Shadowing Hours

## 100+ hours

This is the floor, not the goal. Competitive applicants often have 150–200+ hours. More importantly, the quality and variety of your shadowing matters: Even a semester in a lab counts.

- Shadow a general dentist — this is the baseline
- Shadow at least one specialist (orthodontist, oral surgeon, periodontist, endodontist)
- Try to observe a wide range of procedures, not just cleanings
- Shadow in different settings — private practice, community health, academic clinic

# Other Experiences

## Research

Not required but very helpful — especially at research-focused schools.

## Community Service

Shows you care about access to care — a major theme in dental education today. Clinic volunteering is ideal.

## Leadership

President of a club, captain of a team, founder of something. Shows initiative and the ability to motivate others.

## Letters of Recommendation

Most schools require 3 letters: a science professor, a non-science professor, and a dentist. Choose people who know you well, not just the most impressive names.

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PDI mentors have helped pre-dental students navigate every step of this process — from GPA recovery strategies to finalizing their school lists. Apply for one-on-one mentorship at:

**[predentalinstituteofchicago.com](https://predentalinstituteofchicago.com)**

Pre-Dental Institute of Chicago