

THE PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT LIFE · 2026 EDITION

The PA School Prerequisite Cheat Sheet

Take these five courses first. Then check the expiration clock — because that is the mistake that costs applicants a whole cycle.

338 accredited programs analyzed

48 states

Updated July 2026

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5

courses nearly every program
wants

13%

of programs expire science prereqs
in 6 years or less

48%

place limits on AP / CLEP credit

Built by **Stephen Pasquini, PA-C** · thepalife.com · Data from the **PA School Finder** program database

STEP ONE

The Core 5

There are about 338 accredited PA programs and no two prerequisite lists are identical. But you do not need 338 plans. Five courses show up on essentially every list in the country. Take these first, take them for a grade, and take them with the lab. Everything else is a program-specific add-on.

TYPICALLY 3–4 CR + LAB

1

Human Anatomy

Accepted as Anatomy alone or as A&P I + II. If your school only offers combined A&P, take *both* semesters — many programs will not split one course to fill two requirements.

TYPICALLY 3–4 CR + LAB

2

Human Physiology

The most universally required course on this page. Pair it with Anatomy in the same academic year so the material reinforces itself.

TYPICALLY 3–4 CR + LAB

3

Microbiology

Must be the majors/human-focused version at most programs. A survey "Microbes and Society" course is the single most common rejected substitution.

TYPICALLY 8 CR (2 SEM) + LAB

4

General Chemistry I & II

The gateway. Take it early — it is the prerequisite for Organic and Biochemistry, so a late start here delays two more courses behind it.

TYPICALLY 3 CR · NO LAB

5

Statistics

Nearly universal, frequently forgotten, and the easiest one to knock out at a community college or online. A biostatistics or psychology-statistics course is usually accepted — a general "college algebra" course is not. Do not let this three-credit class be the reason an application is marked incomplete.

Say it in one line

Anatomy · Physiology · Microbiology · General Chemistry I & II · Statistics. If you have all five with a lab and a B or better, you are eligible to apply somewhere. If you are missing one, you are not.

A note on honesty: credit-hour figures above describe the common pattern across programs, not a guarantee for any one school. Always confirm against the individual program's own page before you register for a class — paschoolfinder.com links straight to every one of them.

Then Check the Expiration Clock

Here is the failure mode I see every cycle. Someone finishes their science coursework, spends four years as a scribe or a paramedic building hours, applies — and finds out their Anatomy credit aged out two years ago. Prerequisites expire, and programs disagree wildly about when.

Of 291 accredited programs that publish an expiration window:

EXPIRATION WINDOW	PROGRAMS	SHARE OF PROGRAMS PUBLISHING A WINDOW
No time limit	77	26.5%
10 years	108	37.1%
8 years	4	1.4%
7 years	63	21.6%
6 years	6	2.1%
5 years	32	11.0%
3 years	1	0.3%

What this actually means for your timeline

Roughly **1 in 8 programs (13.4%)** will not accept a science course older than six years, and another 1 in 5 draw the line at seven. Take Anatomy as a sophomore, spend five years building patient-care hours, and a meaningful slice of your list quietly closes before you ever hit submit. Two-thirds of programs are generous — but you do not get to apply only to the generous ones and still call it a strategy.

The three rules that follow from this

1. **Sequence your prereqs last, not first.** If you are planning a multi-year hour-building stretch, build hours *while* taking prereqs, not before them.
2. **Date every course in your spreadsheet.** Pull the transcript — not the year you think it was. Then subtract from your intended matriculation year, not your application year.
3. **Retake strategically, not reflexively.** One aged-out course at three dream programs may be worth retaking. At three programs you were lukewarm about, cut the programs instead.

Ten minutes, not next month

The companion page has a **tracker builder**: pick your programs, choose your start year, get a spreadsheet with every cutoff calculated. 47 programs publish no policy — email those directly.

thepalife.com/your-prereq-cheat-sheet

STEP THREE

The Two Decisions That Split Your List

Decision 1 — Organic Chemistry or Biochemistry?

This is the single biggest branch point after the Core 5, and it decides how many programs you are eligible for. Of the 205 programs with a published organic-chemistry policy in our database:

POLICY	PROGRAMS	WHAT TO DO
Organic Chemistry required	186	Take at least one semester of Orgo with lab.
Biochem accepted instead	15	Either satisfies the requirement — pick the one you will earn a better grade in.
Not required	4	Skip only if every program on your list says so.

The practical answer

Take **one semester of Organic Chemistry with lab, then one semester of Biochemistry**. That combination satisfies nearly every program in the country, including the ones that want "Orgo II or Biochem" in the second slot. Biochemistry is also the single most useful prerequisite for surviving first-year PA pharmacology — so it earns its seat twice.

Decision 2 — Will your AP or CLEP credit count?

Usually, partly. Of 323 programs with a published policy:

POLICY	PROGRAMS	SHARE
Accepted with limits (e.g. non-science only, or must appear on a transcript with credit hours)	155	48.0%
Accepted	153	47.4%
Not accepted	15	4.6%

The trap inside "accepted"

AP credit that appears on your transcript as "AP CHEM — 8 credits, no grade" carries **no GPA weight**. CASPA cannot calculate a science GPA from it. So a program may accept the course for eligibility while your science GPA stays thin — and science GPA is what gets read. If your AP credit covers a Core 5 course and your sGPA is under 3.4, retaking it for a letter grade is usually the higher-yield move.

STEP FOUR

A Build Order That Actually Works

Prerequisites have dependencies. Taking them in the wrong order is how a two-year plan becomes a four-year plan. This is the sequence I would give my own kid.

TERM	TAKE	WHY HERE
Term 1	General Chemistry I + lab Statistics	Gen Chem gates Orgo and Biochem. Stats has no prerequisite, so it fills the schedule cheaply.
Term 2	General Chemistry II + lab Anatomy (or A&P I) + lab	Keeps the chemistry chain moving while you start the anatomy sequence.
Term 3	Organic Chemistry I + lab Physiology (or A&P II) + lab	Your heaviest term. Protect it — this is where science GPA is won or lost.
Term 4	Biochemistry Microbiology + lab	Closes the chemistry branch and the biology branch in one term. You are now eligible almost everywhere.
Term 5 optional	Genetics · Medical Terminology · General or Abnormal Psychology	Program-specific add-ons. Only take what your actual target list requires.

Before you register for anything, confirm these five things

- ☐ **Does it carry a lab?** Anatomy, Physiology, Microbiology and both Chemistries almost always must. An online lecture-only section is the most common wasted tuition dollar in this process.
- ☐ **Is it the majors-level version?** "Human Anatomy" ≠ "Anatomy for Allied Health" at many programs. Check the course number, not the title.
- ☐ **What is the minimum grade?** Most programs require a C or better; competitive applicants carry B+ or above. A C that meets the letter of the rule still drags the sGPA that gets you read.
- ☐ **When does it expire at my top 10 programs?** Write the date in your spreadsheet the day you finish the course.
- ☐ **Will this school's credit transfer cleanly to CASPA?** Community college credit is accepted by the large majority of programs — but a handful still restrict science prereqs to four-year institutions. Verify before you enroll, not after.

STEP FIVE

Now Make It Specific to You

Everything in this guide is the pattern. What you actually need is the list — the exact prerequisites, expiration windows, GPA minimums and deadlines for the programs *you* are applying to. That data lives on [PA School Finder](#), and it is free.

Build your tracker in about ten minutes

Tick the programs you are applying to, choose your start year, and the companion page generates a spreadsheet with each program's CASPA deadline, expiration cutoff, organic chemistry policy, AP/CLEP rule, GPA minimums and PCE requirement already filled in — plus a course grid to complete from your transcripts. Opens in Google Sheets, Excel or Numbers.

thepalife.com/your-prereq-cheat-sheet

Look up any program

Search all 338 accredited programs by state, GPA, PCE hours, tuition and prerequisite policy.
paschoolfinder.com

Check your CASPA GPA

The free calculator that applies Liaison's actual rules — including how retakes and AP credit are handled.
paschoolfinder.com/caspa-gpa-calculator

Your next four moves

1. **Build your target list first — 10 to 15 programs.** Prerequisites are only knowable once you know where you are applying. Working the other direction wastes semesters.
2. **Generate your tracker** from the link above, then open each program's own prerequisite page and fill in what the database cannot verify: exact course list, credits, lab, minimum grade.
3. **Find your gaps and your clock.** Anything missing goes on the build order from page 5. Anything expiring before your matriculation year gets a decision today.
4. **Then start writing.** Prerequisites make you eligible. Your personal statement and your patient-care story are what make you admitted.

Ready for the next piece?

Prerequisites get you past the filter. The essay gets you the interview. Grab the free Personal Statement Starter Kit — the same framework I use with applicants one-on-one.

thepalife.com/the-ultimate-pa-school-personal-statement-starter-kit

About the data. Compiled July 2026 from the [PA School Finder](#) database: 338 ARC-PA accredited programs (Continued, Provisional, Probationary) across 48 states. Percentages are calculated against the programs that publish a policy for that field, not against all 338. Requirements change every cycle — confirm with the program before registering. Not affiliated with ARC-PA, PAEA, NCCPA or CASPA.