

TIPS FOR THE USMLE STEP I

The accounts of some of our students who performed very well on Step I of the USMLE are given below. Although there are no doubt additional study strategies that may work for some of you, it might be helpful to read the following.

– Dr. Engman

Student #1: Melin Khandekar

There are a few different pieces of advice for studying. First, people learn in different ways, and so I think the first thing that people should do is to think about the best way for them to learn. I found that I learned best by doing questions, and so I just did lots and lots of questions. I think some people learn better by reading or groups and things like that, so they should do that for boards too. The other piece of advice is to focus your reading. I thought "First Aid for the Boards" was an excellent book, and I think that just studying this book really well would give you a lot of info for the boards. For me combining that with doing lots of questions and reading and learning the answers was the primary way that I studied.

Student #2: Adam Light

I recommend not studying for the boards specifically until you have finished SBM. One month is plenty of time to study, and there's no need to overindulge. I tried to keep up with SBM but when studying for those tests I spent more time reviewing board review books and Q-Bank questions on the relevant systems than I did memorizing minutiae that might be on SBM tests but which were otherwise not terribly important.

Starting one day after the last exam, I spent about 8-10 hours 6 days a week studying First Aid, BRS Physiology and Pathology, and doing Kaplan Q-Bank questions. During the exam itself make sure to stop and take breaks and take a lunch. Don't do what my brother did and take the exam straight without stopping for any breaks. Overall, if you pace your studying and don't waste time, but you still leave some time for yourself to relax, you should do fine.

Also, keep in mind that the library has a lot of the board review books on reserve. So instead of paying \$20 for a review book in subjects that are not heavily tested (eg. histology, embryology, neuroanatomy) you might be better off just checking the book out from the library and going through it in a few hours.

Student #3: Cory Simpson

In general, I think three or four weeks of dedicated Boards study time after the last exam will be plenty for almost any student. Doing much more will lead to fatigue and unproductive study time. Importantly, be honest with yourself and acknowledge your limitations: (1) Don't force yourself to study during the Spring if it only frustrates you and causes you to do poorly on unit exams; (2) Don't plan to study 12 hours daily if you know you can't; (3) Use an appropriate study aid, i.e. MicroCards may be sufficient if you have a solid understanding of bugs, but something like

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Micro Made Ridiculously Simple may be necessary if you're not confident; (4) Find a study partner or group to hold you accountable if you have a history of procrastination or hypersomnia.

That said, I suggest finding an appropriate review book for each of the major subject areas and working through each at least once, leaving time to re-read those that cover challenging areas for you. The sources I used are listed below, but these are by no means the only ones available. Importantly, when you become tired of reading, take a break to do questions. This breaks up the monotony and also gives you some feedback to know whether you're concentrating on the appropriate subject areas.

General Overview

- First Aid: Read entire book through a few times; re-read chapters for subject areas that are perceived as weak via Q-Bank scores.
- Underground Clinical Vignettes: Helpful for group study; used the books to quiz each other on the presentation of various diseases and syndromes. This was helpful since most Boards questions give a clinical scenario that you must recognize.
- Questions: Keep a record of 50-question block scores to see which areas are showing improvement and which areas are lingering below your target percentage.
- Q-Bank: Complete in 50-question blocks to simulate the test format. To me, Q-Bank questions seemed very detailed and required two or three "jumps" to arrive at the answer, unlike the true exam, which seemed more straightforward.
- Q-Book: Cheap access to additional 50-question blocks.
- Pathology: BRS Pathology. Read entire book early during Boards study period—this is a dense resource. It will take several days to work through, so plan accordingly.
- Physiology: BRS Physiology. This is a pretty quick read if you have a decent understanding of physiology. The book presents broad concepts rather than factual minutia. Requires perhaps two days to work through the whole book.
- Microbiology: MicroCards. These cards are really helpful, especially the diagrams that depict each species and how they are differentiated. Read through these a couple times if your schedule allows. Concentrate on unique characteristics, e.g. the only gram-positive bug with LPS, the only bug cultured on charcoal-yeast extract, the only single-stranded DNA virus, etc.
- Pharmacology: PharmCards and First-Aid. The cards are good if you already understand the basic classes and mechanisms. I didn't try to memorize all the side effects of every drug in the stack, but rather just read over the cards and used them to quiz with study partners to see if we knew the class, the basic mechanism, and the unique side effects. First Aid covers the vast majority of drugs you'll need to know and has a great list of commonly tested side effects.

For the remaining subjects (Biochemistry, Immunology, Embryology, Anatomy, Neuroanatomy, and Behavioral Science), I read through High-Yield once or twice to pick up the frequently tested facts. These didn't seem as heavily tested as the above subjects, so I didn't allow as much time for them. They are also covered pretty well in First Aid.

It's not nearly as bad as everyone might tell you. You'll be surprised how much you can learn and memorize over just a few weeks and how much returns to your memory when you review material you haven't seen for a while.

Student #4: Mandy Redig

The most important thing to remember when studying for this exam is that everyone has a different way of doing it and so you have to find what works for you and NOT let other people's study habits or study plans cause you to lose faith in your own. At this point in your test-taking history, you know what works for you and what doesn't, so don't feel compelled to study in groups (or whatever) if that has never worked for you in the past!

When it comes to specifics for USMLE, remember that the majority of the test is on material covered as an M2, specifically pathophys. So, I would recommend getting BRS Path and annotating it as you go through each unit of M2 year. And, don't blow off second year! If you learn that material well, you will be way ahead when it comes to review. Due to extenuating circumstances, I did not do any other significant boards review until after finishing the M2 exams, at which point I had approximately 4 weeks to study. However, I did pay very close attention to making sure that I had understood and retained info from M2 year, and that was very helpful when I went to review comprehensively. Prior to starting my studying, I had decided to get one review book for each major topic (path, pharm, neuro etc) and I just read online reviews as to which were best....I chose BRS for several, High-Yield for other things like anatomy, as well as getting my hands on as many question books as possible. I also purchased access to Kaplan's QBank. Then, based on what I knew my strengths and weaknesses to be (good at pharm, horrible at neuro), I made a day-by-day outline for what I would study on each day; in the end, I had a calendar for what needed to be studied every day based on what I knew I needed more time to review and what is known to be heavily emphasized on the exam (path and pharm). Then—and this is key—when I was done with the day's material, which was anywhere from 6-10 hours, that was it for the day. I would do another few hours of questions, but once I was confident of my review for the day, I was done and I did not feel guilty about doing something else with whatever was left of the day.

As I started to get closer to the exam, probably about two weeks out, I spent most of my day doing questions. By that point I had reviewed everything that was on the exam and it was more helpful to fine-tune details (which you get by realizing weaknesses on question blocks) than more reading of text I had already gone over several times. I did every last question on QBank plus several thousand more from review books, but it paid off when I went to take the actual exam....I had no exam fatigue whatsoever. Finally, two days before my test I took an entire day off. No studying at all. By that point my brain needed the break and it was very helpful to have that moment of relaxing to focus my energies right before the exam. The easiest thing to do with Step 1 is to either psych yourself out (so-and-so is studying 20 hours a day in April-I should too!) or go way overboard with preparation (I don't need to review for M2 exams because I'm studying for boards). You have to be focused and intense because it's a lot of material—and I did study 10-14 hours a day if you count question time for 4 straight weeks—but I at least would not have been able to sustain that much beyond a 4 week period. Realize that it will be a solid chunk of review, but don't let yourself get burned out by starting to study that way in March. Other people will—and have probably started already—but resist the urge to overstudy. Even if you're training for a marathon, your long run would be 20 miles, not 200, and in my experience, at least, I found that to be an apt analogy for Step 1.

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Student #5: Jeff Craft

Board preparation is best started in late/December or early/January of second year. Earlier or later can also work, but be sure not to wait until four or six weeks before the exam. However much time you may have before your exam, this is the chronological order of studying I would suggest:

1. Buy a systems-based board review book (I used the "The Princeton Review-Cracking the Boards" book, but there are a number of others on the market).
2. Review the units in this book you have already covered in second year, as well as any that may be composed of mostly M1 curriculum. For example, you have already covered cell biology and genetics (from M1) and microbiology (from M2), so review those now. After this review, begin correlating what is in the book with what was in the notes/syllabi from the relevant units during M1/M2. Depending on where you are in studying, this may include simply referencing important lectures (if you don't have much time) or actually writing additions, charts, lists, mnemonics, etc. into the board review book.
3. Continue this process with each unit through the end of your M2 year. One of the real advantages of the systemic board review books is that gross, histology, pathophysiology, and pharmacology are all grouped together. So it works well to use the book as a starting point for organizing information early in an M2 unit, while also reviewing some of the M1 information (*Note: The book should be viewed only as an organizing guide, not as the end-all to understanding the boards*).
4. At the start of the last M2 unit, work out a schedule by which you can perform two vital exercises (this isn't going to be fun):
 - Study and stay up-to-date on the last unit in SBM.
 - Begin—and finish—reviewing every syllabus you collected during the first two years of medical school. I am serious. Read through every single one of the syllabi. Northwestern's instructors may seem eccentric, but their questions end up on the boards!!! If you have time, continue annotating your review book with important information during this process.
5. 2-4 weeks before the exam, study your review book, syllabi and perhaps, drug and microbiology cards. This may also be a good time to do some review questions, provided that you won't freak out. Remember: Review questions in books are harder than on the boards (the people selling the books want to scare you so that you buy more books). They can still be a good practice, and might give you motivation down the final stretch. Incidentally, the time for reading textbooks is over...don't touch one! Also, make certain that you get 6-8 hours of sleep every night. Numerous studies have shown that humans integrate short-term and long-term memory during the periods intervening REM sleep, which occurs late in the sleep cycle.
6. 2 days-2 weeks before exam. Repeat step 6 minus the questions, except the questions serve little purpose at this point. You either are on the right track with your review or...I won't say.
7. This might sound odd, but take the day before the exam off.
8. On the day of the exam, pack a lunch. Go do your thing. Make us all proud.

Student #6: Becky Farmer

First off, let me say that there is not one right approach to studying for the boards. Everyone has a different style of studying, which hopefully you have figured out by now. My best advice is to

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stick with what works for you - if you're a lone wolf, don't study in groups for the boards (and vice versa). You'll only make it harder on yourself if you try to change gears during an incredibly stressful time.

Secondly, I would suggest that you avoid letting other people stress you out. You'll see people in your class who will start to study in October (completely unnecessary, by the way) or who like to carry around every single boards study book that they own, all the time. Don't feel as though you are behind if you haven't really started to study yet, or if someone has books that you don't have, etc. This goes back to doing what works for you - make sure you don't get sucked into the trap of feeling self-conscious about what you're doing compared to everyone else. This is a hard thing to do, but have faith in your methods and you'll be fine.

As for what worked for me.... I didn't really start studying in earnest until after school was over. Classes ended around the middle of May and I studied every day (about 8-10 hours per day) until the middle of June, when I took the exam. This was a lot less stressful than trying to study for both the boards and classes at the same time. The way I looked at it was that a majority of what is found on the boards is taught during your second year, so you should probably put as much time and energy into studying for your classes as you can. That way, when you get to boards study time, it's mostly a review. However, that being said, I did invest in a First Aid and a BRS Path about midway through the second year, so that when I was studying a particular unit, I could consult these two (excellent) reference books to see what I should focus on. This was very helpful, especially since both of these books tend to have the bare bones facts that you really need to know. In the end, these were the only two books that I really used to study, in addition to BRS Physiology. There are a lot of other books out there, but I was just too overwhelmed to try to read all of them. I would suggest getting a few books that you really feel comfortable with and sticking with those, rather than spreading yourself too thin with 50 different books to read (trust me, there isn't time). I also had QBank from Kaplan, which was a great resource for questions - testing yourself periodically is essential to doing well!

I would also stress the importance of focusing on areas in which you feel less prepared. I had a hard time with heart and lung physiology, so I spent more time on these areas rather than wasting time on things I already knew well. You want to maximize your knowledge in all areas, so use your time wisely.

Other than that, just work hard and practice, practice, practice. By the end of 4-5 weeks, you'll be whipped into shape and ready to go! Good luck!

Student #7: Romie Gibly

I don't think it is necessary to study half a year in advance. If you can commit 10-12 hr days, 4-6 weeks should be plenty for a great boards score. Find a place where you can study peacefully, free of distractions.

The one MAJOR thing you should do before starting is to put together a plan. Figure out your days and topics and lay out exactly what you reasonably expect yourself to cover. Many people have calendars they put together with specific day-by-day plans. (My 5 wk plan is available to anyone who wants it).

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Lots of what you learned during the year will be unnecessary for the boards, so DO NOT start with your lecture notes. You need to know far less than you think you do. Limit the number of books you use, too many and you WILL overwhelm yourself. Resources I used were:

- First Aid
- BRS Pathology (know this book, start this one early during the relevant units)
- BRS Physiology (only the digestive, urinary, CV sections)
- High Yield Biochemistry
- High Yield Neuro
- High Yield Embryo
- High Yield Gross Anatomy
- Clinical Microbiology made ridiculously simple (used this SPARINGLY)
- Qbank

I also listened to several of the 'Goljan' lectures when I needed a break, taking notes on important points. You can get a copy of these from an upperclassman or online pretty easily.

My general tactic each day was as follows:

- breakfast
- first 1-2 hrs - review of stuff from the day before I had a hard time with
- work my way through the days material, making notes/flash cards of things I knew were going to need more time memorizing
- (eat a small lunch somewhere in the middle, but avoid a food coma inducer)
- take a break around dinner for about an hour or two
- review some of those notes I made during the day, or do an hour or two of Qbank
- maybe hit the gym for an hour
- get to bed at a reasonable hour (shoot for 7-9 hrs sleep every night)

On my schedule, I went through everything once, weighting the days to topics I knew would be harder, then a second pass, spending around half the time on each topic. In the last 2 weeks, I would take at least 1 or 2 full length practice tests. Give yourself a break day somewhere to just veg out, go outside, checkout the beach, something.

Qbank can be VERY frustrating, try not to let it get to you. There are a lot of errors in there and some VERY stupid and nitpicky questions that are way harder than anything that will actually be on the boards. Use it as a learning tool, but take it with a grain of salt. By my boards date, I had only gotten through about 2/3 of the questions (never reused questions) and my scores would range from 50-75%.

Be strong, it's hard, but very doable. Everyone is going through the same misery as you, and you'll come out of it a smarter person. You may find that you even enjoy having total control over days spent studying instead of trying to fit it around class, clinic, friends, etc. Good Luck!