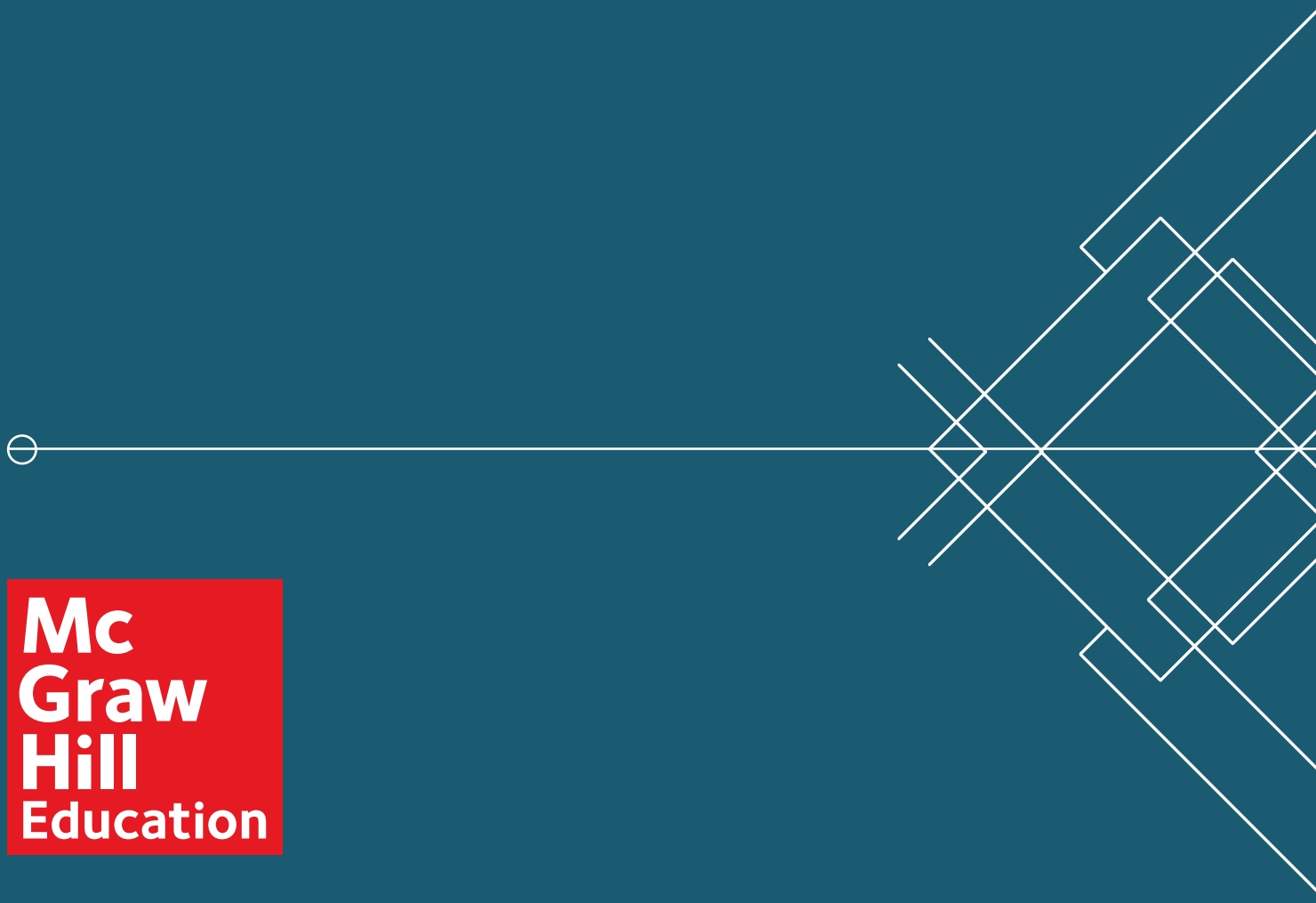
# First Aid™ Study Tips for the USMLE® Step 1

From the authors of *First Aid for the® USMLE® Step 1*



Mc Graw Hill Education

# First Aid Checklist for the USMLE Step 1

This is an example of how you might use the information in Section I to prepare for the USMLE Step 1. Refer to corresponding topics in Section I for more details.

## Years Prior

- ☐ Select top-rated review resources as study guides for first-year medical school courses.
- ☐ Ask for advice from those who have recently taken the USMLE Step 1.

## Months Prior

- ☐ Review computer test format and registration information.
- ☐ Register six months in advance. Carefully verify name and address printed on scheduling permit. Call Prometric or go online for test date ASAP.
- ☐ Define goals for the USMLE Step 1 (eg, comfortably pass, beat the mean, ace the test).
- ☐ Set up a realistic timeline for study. Cover less crammable subjects first. Review subject-by-subject emphasis and clinical vignette format.
- ☐ Simulate the USMLE Step 1 to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses in knowledge and test-taking skills.
- ☐ Evaluate and choose study methods and materials (eg, review books, question banks).

## Weeks Prior

- ☐ Simulate the USMLE Step 1 again. Assess how close you are to your goal.
- ☐ Pinpoint remaining weaknesses. Stay healthy (exercise, sleep).
- ☐ Verify information on admission ticket (eg, location, date).

## One Week Prior

- ☐ Remember comfort measures (loose clothing, earplugs, etc).
- ☐ Work out test site logistics such as location, transportation, parking, and lunch.
- ☐ Call Prometric and confirm your exam appointment.

## One Day Prior

- ☐ Relax.
- ☐ Lightly review short-term material if necessary. Skim high-yield facts.
- ☐ Get a good night's sleep.
- ☐ Make sure the name printed on your photo ID appears EXACTLY the same as the name printed on your scheduling permit.

## Day of Exam

- ☐ Relax. Eat breakfast. Minimize bathroom breaks during the exam by avoiding excessive morning caffeine.
- ☐ Analyze and make adjustments in test-taking technique. You are allowed to review notes/study material during breaks on exam day.

## After the Exam

- ☐ Celebrate, regardless.
- ☐ Send feedback to us on our Web site at **www.firstaidteam.com.**

SECTION I

# Guide to Efficient Exam Preparation

*"A mind of moderate capacity which closely pursues one study must infallibly arrive at great proficiency in that study."*

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

*"Finally, from so little sleeping and so much reading, his brain dried up and he went completely out of his mind."*

—Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *Don Quixote*

*"Sometimes the questions are complicated and the answers are simple."*

—Dr. Seuss

*"He who knows all the answers has not been asked all the questions."*

—Confucius


- Introduction 2
- USMLE Step 1—The Basics 2
- Defining Your Goal 12
- Excelling in the Preclinical Years 12
- Timeline for Study 14
- Study Materials 18
- Test-Taking Strategies 19
- Clinical Vignette Strategies 20
- If You Think You Failed 21
- If You Failed 22
- Testing Agencies 22
- References 22

## INTRODUCTION

Relax.

This section is intended to make your exam preparation easier, not harder. Our goal is to reduce your level of anxiety and help you make the most of your efforts by helping you understand more about the United States Medical Licensing Examination, Step 1 (USMLE Step 1). As a medical student, you are no doubt familiar with taking standardized examinations and quickly absorbing large amounts of material. When you first confront the USMLE Step 1, however, you may find it all too easy to become sidetracked from your goal of studying with maximal effectiveness. Common mistakes that students make when studying for Step 1 include the following:

- Starting to study (including *First Aid*) too late
- Starting to study intensely too early and burning out
- Starting to prepare for boards before creating a knowledge foundation
- Using inefficient or inappropriate study methods
- Buying the wrong resources or buying more resources than you can ever use
- Buying only one publisher's review series for all subjects
- Not using practice examinations to maximum benefit
- Not understanding how scoring is performed or what the score means
- Not using review books along with your classes
- Not analyzing and improving your test-taking strategies
- Getting bogged down by reviewing difficult topics excessively
- Studying material that is rarely tested on the USMLE Step 1
- Failing to master certain high-yield subjects owing to overconfidence
- Using *First Aid* as your sole study resource
- Trying to prepare for it all alone

*The test at a glance:*

- *8-hour exam*
- *Total of 308 multiple choice items*
- *7 test blocks (60 min/block)*
- *44 test items per block*
- *45 minutes of break time, plus another 15 if you skip the tutorial*

In this section, we offer advice to help you avoid these pitfalls and be more productive in your studies.

## USMLE STEP 1—THE BASICS

The USMLE Step 1 is the first of three examinations that you must pass in order to become a licensed physician in the United States. The USMLE is a joint endeavor of the National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) and the Federation of State Medical Boards (FSMB). The USMLE serves as the single examination system for US medical students and international medical graduates (IMGs) seeking medical licensure in the United States.

The Step 1 exam includes test items drawn from the following content areas[1]:

***DISCIPLINE***
Behavioral Sciences
Biochemistry
Genetics
Gross Anatomy & Embryology
Histology & Cell Biology
Microbiology & Immunology
Nutrition
Pathology
Pharmacology
Physiology

***ORGAN SYSTEM***
Behavioral Health & Nervous Systems/Special Senses
Biostatistics & Epidemiology/Population Health
Blood & Lymphoreticular System
Cardiovascular System
Endocrine System
Gastrointestinal System
General Principles of Foundational Science
Immune System
Multisystem Processes & Disorders
Musculoskeletal, Skin, & Subcutaneous Tissue
Renal/Urinary System
Reproductive System
Respiratory System

In 2015, a new, detailed, 31-page content outline was released. However, it is too early to say how useful the information will be in determining high-yield topics.

### How Is the Computer-Based Test (CBT) Structured?

The CBT Step 1 exam consists of one "optional" tutorial/simulation block and seven "real" question blocks of 44 questions each for a total of 308 questions, timed at 60 minutes per block. A short 11-question survey follows the last question block. The computer begins the survey with a prompt to proceed to the next block of questions.

Once an examinee finishes a particular question block on the CBT, he or she must click on a screen icon to continue to the next block. Examinees **cannot** go back and change their answers to questions from any previously completed block. However, changing answers is allowed **within** a block of questions as long as the block has not been ended and if time permits—**unless** the questions are part of a sequential item test set (see p. 4).

### What Is the CBT Like?

Given the unique environment of the CBT, it's important that you become familiar ahead of time with what your test-day conditions will be like. In fact, you can easily add up to 15 minutes to your break time! This is because the 15-minute tutorial offered on exam day may be skipped if you are already

familiar with the exam procedures and the testing interface. The 15 minutes is then added to your allotted break time of 45 minutes for a total of 1 hour of potential break time. You can download the tutorial from the USMLE website and do it before test day. This tutorial interface is very similar to the one you will use in the exam; learn it now and you can skip taking it during the exam, giving you up to 15 extra minutes of break time. You can also gain experience with the CBT format by taking the 132 practice questions available online or by signing up for a practice session at a test center.

*If you know the format, you can skip the tutorial and add up to 15 minutes to your break time!*

For security reasons, examinees are not allowed to bring any personal electronic equipment into the testing area. This includes both digital and analog watches, iPods, tablets, calculators, cell phones, and electronic paging devices. Examinees are also prohibited from carrying in their books, notes, pens/pencils, and scratch paper. Food and beverages are also prohibited in the testing area. The testing centers are monitored by audio and video surveillance equipment. However, most testing centers allot each examinee a small locker outside the testing area in which he or she can store snacks, beverages, and personal items.

The typical question screen in the CBT consists of a question followed by a number of choices on which an examinee can click, together with several navigational buttons on the top of the screen. There is a countdown timer on the lower left corner of the screen as well. There is also a button that allows the examinee to mark a question for review. If a given question happens to be longer than the screen (which occurs very rarely), a scroll bar will appear on the right, allowing the examinee to see the rest of the question. Regardless of whether the examinee clicks on an answer choice or leaves it blank, he or she must click the "Next" button to advance to the next question.

*Keyboard shortcuts:*
- *A, B, etc—letter choices*
- *Enter or spacebar—move to next question*
- *Esc—exit pop-up Lab and Exhibit windows*
- *Alt-T—countdown timers for current session and overall test*

The USMLE features a small number of media clips in the form of audio and/or video. There may even be a question with a multimedia heart sound simulation. In these questions, a digital image of a torso appears on the screen, and the examinee directs a digital stethoscope to various auscultation points to listen for heart and breath sounds. The USMLE orientation materials include several practice questions in these formats. During the exam tutorial, examinees are given an opportunity to ensure that both the audio headphones and the volume are functioning properly. If you are already familiar with the tutorial and planning on skipping it, first skip ahead to the section where you can test your headphones. After you are sure the headphones are working properly, proceed to the exam.

*Heart sounds are tested via media questions. Make sure you know how different heart diseases sound on auscultation.*

*Be sure to test your headphones during the tutorial.*

The USMLE also has a sequential item test format. These questions are grouped together in the list of questions on the left side of the screen and must be completed in order. After an examinee answers the first question, he or she will be given the option to proceed to the next item but will be warned that the answer to the first question will be locked. **After proceeding, examinees will not be able to change the answer selected for that question.**

The question stem and the answer chosen will be available to the examinee as he or she answers the next question(s) in the sequence.

The examinee can call up a window displaying normal laboratory values. In order to do so, he or she must click the "Lab" icon on the top part of the screen. Afterward, the examinee will have the option to choose between "Blood," "Cerebrospinal," "Hematologic," or "Sweat and Urine." The normal-values screen may obscure the question if it is expanded. The examinee may have to scroll down to search for the needed lab values. You might want to memorize some common lab values so you spend less time on questions that require you to analyze these.

The CBT interface provides a running list of questions on the left part of the screen at all times. The software also permits examinees to highlight or cross out information by using their mouse. Finally, there is a "Notes" icon on the top part of the screen that allows students to write notes to themselves for review at a later time. Being familiar with these features can save time and may help you better organize the information you need to answer a question.

For those who feel they might benefit, the USMLE offers an opportunity to take a simulated test, or "CBT Practice Session" at a Prometric center. Students are eligible to register for this three-and-one-half-hour practice session after they have received their scheduling permit.

The same USMLE Step 1 sample test items (150 questions) available on the USMLE website, www.usmle.org, are used at these sessions. **No new items will be presented.** The session is divided into a short tutorial and three 1-hour blocks of 44 test items each at a cost of $75, if your testing region is in the United States or Canada. Students receive a printed percent-correct score after completing the session. **No explanations of questions are provided.**

You may register for a practice session online at www.usmle.org. A separate scheduling permit is issued for the practice session. Students should allow two weeks for receipt of this permit.

*Illustrations on the test include:*
- *Gross specimen photos*
- *Histology slides*
- *Medical imaging (eg, x-ray, CT, MRI)*
- *Electron micrographs*
- *Line drawings*

*Familiarize yourself with the commonly tested lab values.*

*Ctrl-Alt-Delete are the keys of death during the exam. Don't touch them at the same time!*

*You can take a shortened CBT practice test at a Prometric center.*

### How Do I Register to Take the Exam?

Prometric test centers offer Step 1 on a year-round basis, except for the first two weeks in January and major holidays. The exam is given every day except Sunday at most centers. Some schools administer the exam on their own campuses. Check with the test center you want to use before making your exam plans.

US students can apply to take Step 1 at the NBME website. This application allows you to select one of 12 overlapping three-month blocks in which to be tested (eg, April–May–June, June–July–August). Choose your three-month eligibility period wisely. If you need to reschedule outside your initial three-

*The Prometric Web site will display a calendar with open test dates.*

month period, you can request a one-time extension of eligibility for the next contiguous three-month period, and pay a rescheduling fee. The application also includes a photo ID form that must be certified by an official at your medical school to verify your enrollment. After the NBME processes your application, it will send you a scheduling permit.

The scheduling permit you receive from the NBME will contain your USMLE identification number, the eligibility period in which you may take the exam, and two additional numbers. The first of these is known as your "scheduling number." You must have this number in order to make your exam appointment with Prometric. The second number is known as the "candidate identification number," or CIN. Examinees must enter their CINs at the Prometric workstation in order to access their exams. However, you will not be allowed to bring your permit into the exam and will be asked to copy your CIN onto your scratch paper. Prometric has no access to the codes. **Do not lose your permit!** You will not be allowed to take the exam unless you present this permit along with an unexpired, government-issued photo ID that includes your signature (such as a driver's license or passport). Make sure the name on your photo ID exactly matches the name that appears on your scheduling permit.

*The confirmation emails that Prometric and NBME send are not the same as the scheduling permit.*

Once you receive your scheduling permit, you may access the Prometric website or call Prometric's toll-free number to arrange a time to take the exam. You may contact Prometric two weeks before the test date if you want to confirm identification requirements. Although requests for taking the exam may be completed more than six months before the test date, examinees will not receive their scheduling permits earlier than six months before the eligibility period. The eligibility period is the three-month period you have chosen to take the exam. Most medical students choose the April–June or June–August period. Because exams are scheduled on a "first-come, first-served" basis, it is recommended that you contact Prometric as soon as you receive your permit. After you've scheduled your exam, it's a good idea to confirm your exam appointment with Prometric at least one week before your test date. Prometric will provide appointment confirmation on a print-out and by email. Be sure to read the *2015 USMLE Bulletin of Information* for further details.

*Test scheduling is done on a "first-come, first-served" basis. It's important to call and schedule an exam date as soon as you receive your scheduling permit.*

### What If I Need to Reschedule the Exam?

You can change your test date and/or center by contacting Prometric at 1-800-MED-EXAM (1-800-633-3926) or www.prometric.com. Make sure to have your CIN when rescheduling. If you are rescheduling by phone, you must speak with a Prometric representative; leaving a voice-mail message will not suffice. To avoid a rescheduling fee, you will need to request a change at least 31 calendar days before your appointment. Please note that your rescheduled test date must fall within your assigned three-month eligibility period.

### When Should I Register for the Exam?

*Register six months in advance for seating and scheduling preference.*

You should plan to register as far in advance as possible ahead of your desired test date (eg, six months), but, depending on your particular test center, new dates and times may open closer to the date. Scheduling early will guarantee that you will get either your test center of choice or one within a 50-mile radius of your first choice. For most US medical students, the desired testing window is in June, since most medical school curricula for the second year end in May or June. Thus, US medical students should plan to register before January in anticipation of a June test date. The timing of the exam is more flexible for IMGs, as it is related only to when they finish exam preparation. Talk with upperclassmen who have already taken the test so you have real-life experience from students who went through a similar curriculum, then formulate your own strategy.

### Where Can I Take the Exam?

Your testing location is arranged with Prometric when you call for your test date (after you receive your scheduling permit). For a list of Prometric locations nearest you, visit www.prometric.com.

### How Long Will I Have to Wait Before I Get My Scores?

The USMLE reports scores in three to four weeks, unless there are delays in score processing. Examinees will be notified via email when their scores are available. By following the online instructions, examinees will be able to view, download, and print their score report. Additional information about score timetables and accessibility is available on the official USMLE website.

### What About Time?

*Gain extra break time by skipping the tutorial or finishing a block early.*

Time is of special interest on the CBT exam. Here's a breakdown of the exam schedule:

| | |
|---|---|
| 15 minutes | Tutorial (skip if familiar with test format and features) |
| 7 hours | Seven 60-minute question blocks |
| 45 minutes | Break time (includes time for lunch) |

The computer will keep track of how much time has elapsed on the exam. However, the computer will show you only how much time you have remaining in a given block. Therefore, it is up to you to determine if you are pacing yourself properly (at a rate of approximately one question per 78 seconds).

The computer will not warn you if you are spending more than your allotted time for a break. You should therefore budget your time so that you can take a short break when you need one and have time to eat. You must be especially careful not to spend too much time in between blocks (you should keep track

of how much time elapses from the time you finish a block of questions to the time you start the next block). After you finish one question block, you'll need to click to proceed to the next block of questions. If you do not click within 30 seconds, you will automatically be entered into a break period.

Forty-five minutes is the minimum break time for the day, but you are not required to use all of it, nor are you required to use any of it. You can gain extra break time (but not time for the question blocks) by skipping the tutorial or by finishing a block ahead of the allotted time. Any time remaining on the clock when you finish a block gets added to your remaining break time. Once a new question block has been started, you may not take a break until you have reached the end of that block. If you do so, this will be recorded as an "unauthorized break" and will be reported on your final score report.

▸ *Be careful to watch the clock on your break time.*

Finally, be aware that it may take a few minutes of your break time to "check out" of the secure resting room and then "check in" again to resume testing, so plan accordingly. The "check-in" process may include fingerprints, pocket checks, and metal detector scanning. Some students recommend pocketless clothing on exam day to streamline the process.

### If I Freak Out and Leave, What Happens to My Score?

Your scheduling permit shows a CIN that you will need to enter to start your exam. Entering the CIN is the same as breaking the seal on a test book, and you are considered to have started the exam when you do so. However, no score will be reported if you do not complete the exam. In fact, if you leave at any time from the start of the test to the last block, no score will be reported. The fact that you started but did not complete the exam, however, will appear on your USMLE score transcript. Even though a score is not posted for incomplete tests, examinees may still get an option to request that their scores be calculated and reported if they desire; unanswered questions will be scored as incorrect.

The exam ends when all question blocks have been completed or when their time has expired. As you leave the testing center, you will receive a printed test-completion notice to document your completion of the exam. To receive an official score, you must finish the entire exam.

### What Types of Questions Are Asked?

▸ *Nearly three fourths of Step 1 questions begin with a description of a patient.*

**One-best-answer multiple choice items** (either singly or as part of a sequential item set) are the only question type on the exam. Most questions consist of a clinical scenario or a direct question followed by a list of five or more options. You are required to select the single best answer among the options given. There are no "except," "not," or matching questions on the exam. A number of options may be partially correct, in which case you must select the option that best answers the question or completes the statement. Additionally, keep in mind that experimental questions may appear on the exam, which do not affect your score.

### How Is the Test Scored?

Each Step 1 examinee receives an electronic score report that includes the examinee's pass/fail status, a three-digit test score, and a graphic depiction of the examinee's performance by discipline and organ system or subject area. The actual organ system profiles reported may depend on the statistical characteristics of a given administration of the examination.

The USMLE score report is divided into two sections: performance by discipline and performance by organ system. Each of the 308 questions (minus experimental questions) is tagged according to any or all relevant content areas. Your performance in each discipline and each organ system is represented by a line of X's, where the width of the line is related to the confidence interval for your performance, which is often a direct consequence of the total number of questions for each discipline/system. If any lines have an asterisk (*) at the far right, this means your performance was exemplary in that area—not necessarily representing a perfect score, but often close to it.

The NBME provides a three-digit test score based on the total number of items answered correctly on the examination (see Figure 1). Your three-digit score will be qualified by the mean and standard deviation of US and Canadian medical school first-time examinees. The translation from the lines of X's and number of asterisks you receive on your report to the three-digit score is unclear, but higher three-digit scores are associated with more asterisks.

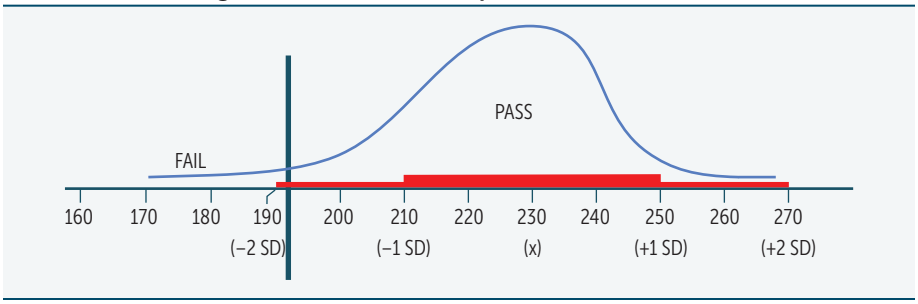
*The mean Step 1 score for US medical students continues to rise, from 200 in 1991 to 230 in 2015.*

Since some questions may be experimental and are not counted, it is possible to get different scores for the same number of correct answers. The most recent mean score was 230 with a standard deviation of 20.

A score of **192** or higher is required to pass Step 1. The NBME does not report the minimum number of correct responses needed to pass, but estimates that it is roughly 60–70%. The NBME may adjust the minimum passing score in the future, so please check the USMLE website or www.firstaidteam.com for updates.

According to the USMLE, medical schools receive a listing of total scores and pass/fail results plus group summaries by discipline and organ system. Students can withhold their scores from their medical school if they wish. Official USMLE transcripts, which can be sent on request to residency programs, include only total scores, not performance profiles.

**FIGURE 1. Scoring Scale for the USMLE Step 1.**



Consult the USMLE website or your medical school for the most current and accurate information regarding the examination.

### What Does My Score Mean?

The most important point with the Step 1 score is passing versus failing. Passing essentially means, "Hey, you're on your way to becoming a fully licensed doc." As Table 1 shows, the majority of students pass the exam, so remember, we told you to relax.

Beyond that, the main point of having a quantitative score is to give you a sense of how well you've done on the exam and to help schools and residencies rank their students and applicants, respectively.

### Official NBME/USMLE Resources

The NBME offers a Comprehensive Basic Science Examination (CBSE) for practice that is a shorter version of the Step 1. The CBSE contains four blocks of 50 questions each and covers material that is typically learned during the basic science years. Scores range from 45 to 95 and correlate with a Step 1 equivalent (see Table 2). The standard error of measurement is approximately 3 points, meaning a score of 80 would estimate the student's proficiency is somewhere between 77 and 83. In other words, the actual Step 1 score could be predicted to be between 218 and 232. Of course, these values do not correlate exactly, and they do not reflect different test preparation methods. Many schools use this test to gauge whether a student is expected to pass Step 1. If this test is offered by your school, it is usually conducted at the end of regular didactic time before any dedicated Step 1 preparation. If you do not encounter the CBSE before your dedicated study time, you need not worry about taking it. Use the information to help set realistic goals and timetables for your success.

▶ *Practice questions may be easier than the actual exam.*

**TABLE 1. Passing Rates for the 2013–2014 USMLE Step 1.[2]**

| | 2013 | | 2014 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | No. Tested | % Passing | No. Tested | % Passing |
| Allopathic 1st takers | 19,108 | 97% | 19,582 | 96% |
| Repeaters | 915 | 72% | 812 | 68% |
| Allopathic total | 20,023 | 95% | 20,394 | 95% |
| Osteopathic 1st takers | 2,680 | 94% | 2,810 | 93% |
| Repeaters | 46 | 74% | 36 | 69% |
| Osteopathic total | 2,726 | 94% | 2,846 | 93% |
| **Total US/Canadian** | **22,749** | **95%** | **23,240** | **95%** |
| IMG 1st takers | 14,649 | 79% | 15,149 | 78% |
| Repeaters | 3,772 | 44% | 2,889 | 38% |
| IMG total | 18,421 | 72% | 18,038 | 72% |
| **Total Step 1 examinees** | **41,170** | **85%** | **41,278** | **85%** |

The NBME also offers six forms of Comprehensive Basic Science Self-Assessment (CBSSA). Students who prepared for the exam using this web-based tool reported that they found the format and content highly indicative of questions tested on the actual exam. In addition, the CBSSA is a fair predictor of USMLE performance (see Table 3). The test interface, however, does not match the actual USMLE test interface, so practicing with these forms alone is not advised.

The CBSSA exists in two formats: standard-paced and self-paced, both of which consist of four sections of 50 questions each (for a total of 200 multiple choice items). The standard-paced format allows the user up to 65 minutes to complete each section, reflecting time limits similar to the actual exam. By contrast, the self-paced format places a 4:20 time limit on answering all multiple choice questions. Every few years, a new form is released and an older one is retired, reflecting changes in exam content.

Keep in mind that this bank of questions is available only on the web. The NBME requires that users log on, register, and start the test within 30 days of registration. Once the assessment has begun, users are required to complete the sections within 20 days. Following completion of the questions, the CBSSA provides a performance profile indicating the user's relative strengths and weaknesses, much like the report profile for the USMLE Step 1 exam. The profile is scaled with an average score of 500 and a standard deviation of 100. Please note that the CBSSAs do not list the correct answers to the questions at the end of the session. However, forms can be purchased with an extended feedback option; these tests show you which questions you answered incorrectly, but do not show you the correct answer or explain why your choice was wrong. Feedback from the self-assessment takes the form of a performance profile and nothing more. The NBME charges $50 for assessments without feedback and $60 for assessments with expanded feedback. The fees are payable by credit card or money order. For more information regarding the CBSE and the CBSSA, visit the NBME's website at www.nbme.org.

The NBME scoring system is weighted for each assessment exam. While some exams seem more difficult than others, the score reported takes into account these inter-test differences when predicting Step 1 performance. Also, while many students report seeing Step 1 questions "word-for-word" out of the assessments, the NBME makes special note that no live USMLE questions are shown on any NBME assessment.

Lastly, the International Foundations of Medicine (IFOM) offers a Basic Science Examination (BSE) practice exam at participating Prometric test centers for $200. Students may also take the self-assessment test online for $35 through the NBME's website. The IFOM BSE is intended to determine an examinee's relative areas of strength and weakness in general areas of basic science—not to predict performance on the USMLE Step 1 exam—and the content covered by the two examinations is somewhat different. However, because there is substantial overlap in content coverage and many IFOM items were previously used on the USMLE Step 1, it is possible to roughly

**TABLE 2. CBSE to USMLE Score Prediction.**

| CBSE Score | Step 1 Equivalent |
|---|---|
| ≥ 94 | ≥ 260 |
| 92 | 255 |
| 90 | 250 |
| 88 | 245 |
| 86 | 240 |
| 84 | 235 |
| 82 | 230 |
| 80 | 225 |
| 78 | 220 |
| 76 | 215 |
| 74 | 210 |
| 72 | 205 |
| 70 | 200 |
| 68 | 195 |
| 66 | 190 |
| 64 | 185 |
| 62 | 180 |
| 60 | 175 |
| 58 | 170 |
| 56 | 165 |
| 54 | 160 |
| 52 | 155 |
| 50 | 150 |
| 48 | 145 |
| 46 | 140 |
| ≤ 44 | ≤ 135 |

**TABLE 3. CBSSA to USMLE Score Prediction.**

| CBSSA Score | Approximate USMLE Step 1 Score |
|---|---|
| 150 | 153 |
| 200 | 164 |
| 250 | 175 |
| 300 | 185 |
| 350 | 196 |
| 400 | 207 |
| 450 | 217 |
| 500 | 228 |
| 550 | 239 |
| 600 | 249 |
| 650 | 260 |
| 700 | 271 |
| 750 | 281 |
| 800 | 292 |

project IFOM performance onto the USMLE Step 1 score scale. More information is available at http://www.nbme.org/ifom/.

## DEFINING YOUR GOAL

It is useful to define your own personal performance goal when approaching the USMLE Step 1. Your style and intensity of preparation can then be matched to your goal. Furthermore, your goal may depend on your school's requirements, your specialty choice, your grades to date, and your personal assessment of the test's importance. Do your best to define your goals early so that you can prepare accordingly.

Certain highly competitive residency programs, such as those in plastic surgery and orthopedic surgery, have acknowledged their use of Step 1 scores in the selection process. In such residency programs, greater emphasis may be placed on attaining a high score, so students who seek to enter these programs may wish to consider aiming for a very high score on the Step 1 exam (see Figure 2). At the same time, your Step 1 score is only one of a number of factors that are assessed when you apply for residency. In fact, many residency programs value other criteria such as letters of recommendation, third-year clerkship grades, honors, and research experience more than a high score on Step 1. Fourth-year medical students who have recently completed the residency application process can be a valuable resource in this regard.

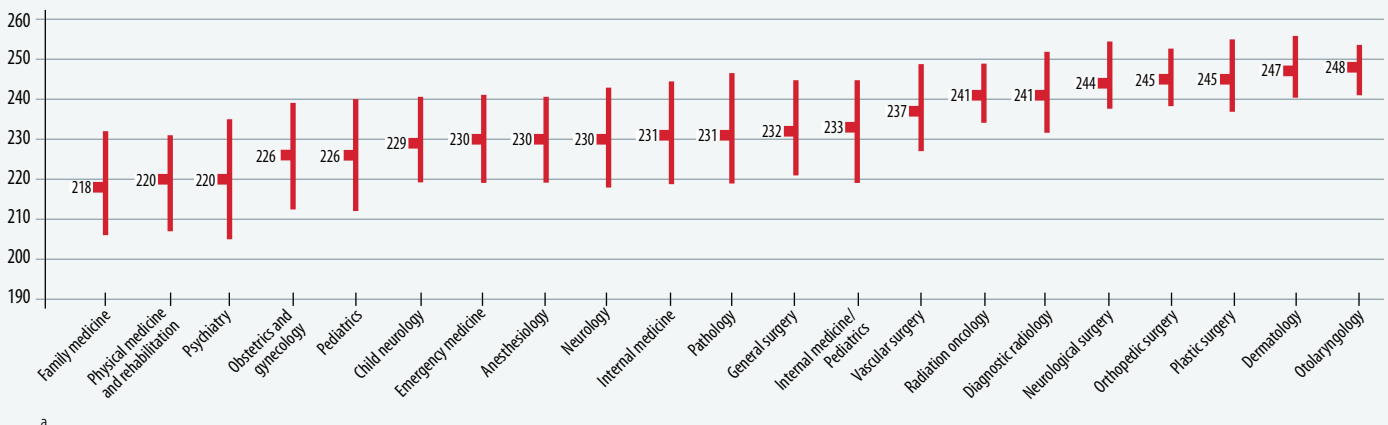
*Fourth-year medical students have the best feel for how Step 1 scores factor into the residency application process.*

*Some competitive residency programs place more weight on Step 1 scores when choosing candidates to interview.*

## EXCELLING IN THE PRECLINICAL YEARS

Many students feel overwhelmed during the first few weeks of medical school and struggle to find a workable system. Strategies that worked during your undergraduate years may or may not work as you prepare for the USMLE

**FIGURE 2. Median USMLE Step 1 Score by Specialty for Matched US Seniors.[a]**




[a] Vertical lines show interquartile range.

Step 1. Below are three study methods to use during the preclinical years and their effectiveness for Step 1 preparation. Regardless of your choice, the foundation of knowledge you build during your basic science years is the most important resource for success on the USMLE Step 1.

### Highlight, Read, and Reread

The most passive of the three methods, this generally consists of sitting through lectures and highlighting relevant material (sometimes in an assortment of colors). Notes are jotted in the margins, but the general bulk of information is in the same order presented by the various lecturers. Students then go home and reread the notes, focusing on the highlights. It is difficult to test integration of concepts. These notes (usually in the thousands of pages) are almost useless for Step 1 preparation.

### Flash cards

There is no shortage of flash card applications, from make-your-own cards to purchasable premade decks. Self-made flash cards, if done correctly, offer the ability to objectively test necessary facts. Written in an open-ended format and coupled with spaced repetition, they train both recognition and recall. Apps exist for various smartphones and tablets, so the flash cards are always accessible. However, the ease of quickly creating digital cards and sharing can lead to flash card overload (it is unsustainable to make 50 flash cards per lecture!). Even at a modest pace, the thousands upon thousands of cards are too many for Step 1 preparation. Unless you have specified high-yield cards (and checked the content with high-yield resources), stick to premade cards by reputable sources that curate the vast amount of knowledge for you.

*Watch out for flash card overload!*

### Tables and Summaries

This is the most active (and time intensive) form of learning. It consists of integrating the pertinent information from paragraphs on each subject into tables that cut across topics within the same category. The key is to synthesize the sequentially presented material. Sensitive and specific findings should be highlighted. While many review sources offer this material in various styles and formats, your own class notes may in fact be concise enough to use as an adjunct for Step 1 preparation, and they have the added benefit of being organized to your liking.

## TIMELINE FOR STUDY

### Before Starting

Your preparation for the USMLE Step 1 should begin when you enter medical school. Organize and commit to studying from the beginning so that when the time comes to prepare for the USMLE, you will be ready with a strong foundation.

*Customize your schedule. Tackle your weakest section first.*

### Make a Schedule

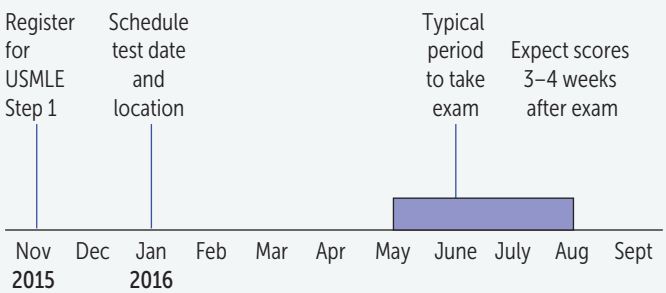
After you have defined your goals, map out a study schedule that is consistent with your objectives, your vacation time, the difficulty of your ongoing coursework, and your family and social commitments (see Figure 3). Determine whether you want to spread out your study time or concentrate it into 14-hour study days in the final weeks. Then factor in your own history in preparing for standardized examinations (eg, SAT, MCAT). Talk to students at your school who have recently taken Step 1. Ask them for their study schedules, especially those who have study habits and goals similar to yours.

Typically, US medical schools allot between four and eight weeks for dedicated Step 1 preparation. The time you dedicate to exam preparation will depend on your target score as well as your success in preparing yourself during the first two years of medical school. Some students reserve about a week at the end of their study period for final review; others save just a few days. When you have scheduled your exam date, do your best to adhere to it. Studies show that a later testing date does not translate into a higher score, so avoid pushing back your test date without good reason.[3]

*"Crammable" subjects should be covered later and less crammable subjects earlier.*

Make your schedule realistic, and set achievable goals. Many students make the mistake of studying at a level of detail that requires too much time for a comprehensive review—reading *Gray's Anatomy* in a couple of days is not a realistic goal! Have one catch-up day per week of studying. No matter how well you stick to your schedule, unexpected events happen. But don't let yourself procrastinate because you have catch-up days; stick to your schedule as closely as possible and revise it regularly on the basis of your actual progress.

**FIGURE 3. Typical Timeline for the USMLE Step 1.**



Be careful not to lose focus. Beware of feelings of inadequacy when comparing study schedules and progress with your peers. **Avoid others who stress you out.** Focus on a few top-rated resources that suit your learning style—not on some obscure books your friends may pass down to you. Accept the fact that you cannot learn it all.

You will need time for uninterrupted and focused study. Plan your personal affairs to minimize crisis situations near the date of the test. Allot an adequate number of breaks in your study schedule to avoid burnout. Maintain a healthy lifestyle with proper diet, exercise, and sleep.

*Avoid burnout. Maintain proper diet, exercise, and sleep habits.*

Another important aspect of your preparation is your studying environment. **Study where you have always been comfortable studying.** Be sure to include everything you need close by (review books, notes, coffee, snacks, etc). If you're the kind of person who cannot study alone, form a study group with other students taking the exam. The main point here is to create a comfortable environment with minimal distractions.

### Year(s) Prior

The knowledge you gained during your first two years of medical school and even during your undergraduate years should provide the groundwork on which to base your test preparation. Student scores on NBME subject tests (commonly known as "shelf exams") have been shown to be highly correlated with subsequent Step 1 scores.[4] Moreover, undergraduate science GPAs as well as MCAT scores are strong predictors of performance on the Step 1 exam.[5]

*Buy review books early (first year) and use while studying for courses.*

We also recommend that you buy highly rated review books early in your first year of medical school and use them as you study throughout the two years. When Step 1 comes along, these books will be familiar and personalized to the way in which you learn. It is risky and intimidating to use unfamiliar review books in the final two or three weeks preceding the exam. Some students find it helpful to personalize and annotate *First Aid* throughout the curriculum.

### Months Prior

Review test dates and the application procedure. Testing for the USMLE Step 1 is done on a year-round basis. If you have disabilities or special circumstances, contact the NBME as early as possible to discuss test accommodations (see the Section I Supplement at www.firstaidteam.com/bonus).

Use this time to finalize your ideal schedule. Consider upcoming breaks and whether you want to relax or study. Work backward from your test date to make sure you finish at least one question bank. Also add time to redo missed or flagged questions (which may be half the bank). This is the time to build a structured plan with enough flexibility for the realities of life.

*Simulate the USMLE Step 1 under "real" conditions before beginning your studies.*

Begin doing blocks of questions from reputable question banks under "real" conditions. Don't use tutor mode until you're sure you can finish blocks in the allotted time. It is important to continue balancing success in your normal studies with the Step 1 test preparation process.

### Weeks Prior (Dedicated Preparation)

- *In the final two weeks, focus on review, practice questions, and endurance. Stay confident!*

Your dedicated prep time may be one week or two months. You should have a working plan as you go into this period. Finish your school work strong, take a day off, and then get to work. Start by simulating a full-length USMLE Step 1 if you haven't yet done so. Consider doing one NBME CBSSA and the 150 free questions from the NBME website. Alternatively, you could choose 7 blocks of randomized questions from a commercial question bank. Make sure you get feedback on your strengths and weaknesses and adjust your studying accordingly. Many students study from review sources or comprehensive programs for part of the day, then do question blocks. Also, keep in mind that reviewing 46 questions can take upward of two hours. Feedback from CBSSA exams and question banks will help you focus on your weaknesses.

### One Week Prior

- *One week before the test:*
  - *Sleep according to the same schedule you'll use on test day*
  - *Review the CBT tutorial one last time*
  - *Call Prometric to confirm test date and time*

Make sure you have your CIN (found on your scheduling permit) as well as other items necessary for the day of the examination, including a current driver's license or another form of photo ID with your signature (make sure the name on your **ID exactly** matches that on your scheduling permit). Confirm the Prometric testing center location and test time. Work out how you will get to the testing center and what parking and traffic problems you might encounter. Drive separately from other students taking the test on the same day, and exchange cell phone numbers in case of emergencies. If possible, visit the testing site to get a better idea of the testing conditions you will face. Determine what you will do for lunch. Make sure you have everything you need to ensure that you will be comfortable and alert at the test site. It may be beneficial to adjust your schedule to start waking up at the same time that you will on your test day. And of course, make sure to maintain a healthy lifestyle and get enough sleep.

### One Day Prior

Try your best to relax and rest the night before the test. Double-check your admissions and test-taking materials as well as the comfort measures discussed earlier so that you will not have to deal with such details on the morning of the exam. At this point it will be more effective to review short-term memory material that you're already familiar with than to try to learn new material. The Rapid Review section at the end of this book is high yield for last-minute studying. Remember that regardless of how hard you have studied, you cannot know everything. There will be things on the exam that you have never even seen before, so do not panic. Do not underestimate your abilities.

Many students report difficulty sleeping the night prior to the exam. This is often exacerbated by going to bed much earlier than usual. Do whatever it takes to ensure a good night's sleep (eg, massage, exercise, warm milk, no back-lit screens at night). Do not change your daily routine prior to the exam. Exam day is not the day for a caffeine-withdrawal headache.

### Morning of the Exam

On the morning of the Step 1 exam, wake up at your regular time and eat a normal breakfast. If you think it will help you, have a close friend or family member check to make sure you get out of bed. Make sure you have your scheduling permit admission ticket, test-taking materials, and comfort measures as discussed earlier. Wear loose, comfortable clothing. Plan for a variable temperature in the testing center. Arrive at the test site 30 minutes before the time designated on the admission ticket; however, do not come too early, as doing so may intensify your anxiety. When you arrive at the test site, the proctor should give you a USMLE information sheet that will explain critical factors such as the proper use of break time. Seating may be assigned, but ask to be reseated if necessary; you need to be seated in an area that will allow you to remain comfortable and to concentrate. Get to know your testing station, especially if you have never been in a Prometric testing center before. Listen to your proctors regarding any changes in instructions or testing procedures that may apply to your test site.

*No notes, books, calculators, pagers, cell phones, recording devices, or watches of any kind are allowed in the testing area, but they are allowed in lockers.*

*Arrive at the testing center 30 minutes before your scheduled exam time. If you arrive more than half an hour late, you will not be allowed to take the test.*

Finally, remember that it is natural (and even beneficial) to be a little nervous. Focus on being mentally clear and alert. Avoid panic. When you are asked to begin the exam, take a deep breath, focus on the screen, and then begin. Keep an eye on the timer. Take advantage of breaks between blocks to stretch, maybe do some jumping jacks, and relax for a moment with deep breathing or stretching.

### After the Test

After you have completed the exam, be sure to have fun and relax regardless of how you may feel. Taking the test is an achievement in itself. Remember, you are much more likely to have passed than not. Enjoy the free time you have before your clerkships. Expect to experience some "reentry" phenomena as you try to regain a real life. Once you have recovered sufficiently from the test (or from partying), we invite you to send us your feedback, corrections, and suggestions for entries, facts, mnemonics, strategies, resource ratings, and the like (see p. xvii, How to Contribute). Sharing your experience will benefit fellow medical students and IMGs.

## STUDY MATERIALS

### Quality Considerations

Although an ever-increasing number of review books and software are now available on the market, the quality of such material is highly variable. Some common problems are as follows:

- Certain review books are too detailed to allow for review in a reasonable amount of time or cover subtopics that are not emphasized on the exam.
- Many sample question books were originally written years ago and have not been adequately updated to reflect recent trends.
- Some question banks test to a level of detail that you will not find on the exam.

*If a given review book is not working for you, stop using it no matter how highly rated it may be or how much it costs.*

### Review Books

In selecting review books, be sure to weigh different opinions against each other, read the reviews and ratings in Section IV of this guide, examine the books closely in the bookstore, and choose carefully. You are investing not only money but also your limited study time. Do not worry about finding the "perfect" book, as many subjects simply do not have one, and different students prefer different formats. Supplement your chosen books with personal notes from other sources, including what you learn from question banks.

*Charts and diagrams may be the best approach for physiology and biochemistry, whereas tables and outlines may be preferable for microbiology.*

There are two types of review books: those that are stand-alone titles and those that are part of a series. Books in a series generally have the same style, and you must decide if that style works for you. However, a given style is not optimal for every subject.

You should also find out which books are up to date. Some recent editions reflect major improvements, whereas others contain only cursory changes. Take into consideration how a book reflects the format of the USMLE Step 1.

### Practice Tests

*Most practice exams are shorter and less clinical than the real thing.*

Taking practice tests provides valuable information about potential strengths and weaknesses in your fund of knowledge and test-taking skills. Some students use practice examinations simply as a means of breaking up the monotony of studying and adding variety to their study schedule, whereas other students rely almost solely on practice. You should also subscribe to one or more high-quality question banks. In addition, students report that many current practice-exam books have questions that are, on average, shorter and less clinically oriented than those on the current USMLE Step 1.

Additionally, some students preparing for the Step 1 exam have started to incorporate case-based books intended primarily for clinical students on the wards or studying for the Step 2 CK exam. *First Aid Cases for the USMLE Step 1* aims to directly address this need.

After taking a practice test, spend time on each question and each answer choice whether you were right or wrong. There are important teaching points in each explanation. Knowing why a wrong answer choice is incorrect is just as important as knowing why the right answer is correct. Do not panic if your practice scores are low as many questions try to trick or distract you to highlight a certain point. Use the questions you missed or were unsure about to develop focused plans during your scheduled catch-up time.

*Use practice tests to identify concepts and areas of weakness, not just facts that you missed.*

### Textbooks and Course Syllabi

Limit your use of textbooks and course syllabi for Step 1 review. Many textbooks are too detailed for high-yield review and include material that is generally not tested on the USMLE Step 1 (eg, drug dosages, complex chemical structures). Syllabi, although familiar, are inconsistent across medical schools and frequently reflect the emphasis of individual faculty, which often does not correspond to that of the USMLE Step 1. Syllabi also tend to be less organized than top-rated books and generally contain fewer diagrams and study questions.

## TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES

Your test performance will be influenced by both your knowledge and your test-taking skills. You can strengthen your performance by considering each of these factors. Test-taking skills and strategies should be developed and perfected well in advance of the test date so that you can concentrate on the test itself. We suggest that you try the following strategies to see if they might work for you.

*Practice! Develop your test-taking skills and strategies well before the test date.*

### Pacing

You have seven hours to complete 308 questions. Note that each one-hour block contains 44 questions. This works out to about 82 seconds per question. If you find yourself spending too much time on a question, mark the question, make an educated guess, and move on. If time permits, come back to the question later. Remember that some questions may be experimental and do not count for points (and reassure yourself that these experimental questions are the ones that are stumping you). In the past, pacing errors have been detrimental to the performance of even highly prepared examinees. The bottom line is to keep one eye on the clock at all times!

*Time management is an important skill for exam success.*

### Dealing with Each Question

There are several established techniques for efficiently approaching multiple choice questions; find what works for you. One technique begins with identifying each question as easy, workable, or impossible. Your goal should be to answer all easy questions, resolve all workable questions in a

reasonable amount of time, and make quick and intelligent guesses on all impossible questions. Most students read the stem, think of the answer, and turn immediately to the choices. A second technique is to first skim the answer choices to get a context, then read the last sentence of the question (the lead-in), and then read through the passage quickly, extracting only information relevant to answering the question. Try a variety of techniques on practice exams and see what works best for you. If you get overwhelmed, remember that a 30-second time out to refocus may get you back on track.

### Guessing

There is **no penalty** for wrong answers. Thus, **no test block should be left with unanswered questions.** A hunch is probably better than a random guess. If you have to guess, we suggest selecting an answer you recognize over one with which you are totally unfamiliar.

### Changing Your Answer

*Go with your first hunch, unless you are certain that you are a good second-guesser.*

The conventional wisdom is not to change answers that you have already marked unless there is a convincing and logical reason to do so—in other words, go with your "first hunch." Many question banks tell you how many questions you changed from right to wrong, wrong to wrong, and wrong to right. Use this feedback to judge how good a second-guesser you are. If you have extra time, reread the question stem and make sure you didn't misinterpret the question.

## CLINICAL VIGNETTE STRATEGIES

*Be prepared to read fast and think on your feet!*

In recent years, the USMLE Step 1 has become increasingly clinically oriented. This change mirrors the trend in medical education toward introducing students to clinical problem solving during the basic science years. The increasing clinical emphasis on Step 1 may be challenging to those students who attend schools with a more traditional curriculum.

### What Is a Clinical Vignette?

*Practice questions that include case histories or descriptive vignettes are critical for Step 1 preparation.*

A clinical vignette is a short (usually paragraph-long) description of a patient, including demographics, presenting symptoms, signs, and other information concerning the patient. Sometimes this paragraph is followed by a brief listing of important physical findings and/or laboratory results. The task of assimilating all this information and answering the associated question in the span of one minute can be intimidating. So be prepared to read quickly and think on your feet. Remember that the question is often indirectly asking something you already know.

### Strategy

Remember that Step 1 vignettes usually describe diseases or disorders in their most classic presentation. So look for cardinal signs (eg, malar rash for SLE or nuchal rigidity for meningitis) in the narrative history. Be aware that the question will contain classic signs and symptoms instead of buzzwords. Sometimes the data from labs and the physical exam will help you confirm or reject possible diagnoses, thereby helping you rule answer choices in or out. In some cases, they will be a dead giveaway for the diagnosis.

*Step 1 vignettes usually describe diseases or disorders in their most classic presentation.*

Making a diagnosis from the history and data is often not the final answer. Not infrequently, the diagnosis is divulged at the end of the vignette, after you have just struggled through the narrative to come up with a diagnosis of your own. The question might then ask about a related aspect of the diagnosed disease. Consider skimming the answer choices and lead-in before diving into a long stem. However, be careful with skimming the answer choices; going too fast may warp your perception of what the vignette is asking.

## IF YOU THINK YOU FAILED

After the test, many examinees feel that they have failed, and most are at the very least unsure of their pass/fail status. There are several sensible steps you can take to plan for the future in the event that you do not achieve a passing score. First, save and organize all your study materials, including review books, practice tests, and notes. Familiarize yourself with the reapplication procedures for Step 1, including application deadlines and upcoming test dates.

Make sure you know both your school's and the NBME's policies regarding retakes. The NBME allows a maximum of six attempts to pass each Step examination.[6] You may take Step 1 no more than three times within a 12-month period. Your fourth and subsequent attempts must be at least 12 months after your first attempt at that exam and at least six months after your most recent attempt at that exam.

*If you pass Step 1 (score of 192 or above), you are not allowed to retake the exam.*

The performance profiles on the back of the USMLE Step 1 score report provide valuable feedback concerning your relative strengths and weaknesses. Study these profiles closely. Set up a study timeline to strengthen gaps in your knowledge as well as to maintain and improve what you already know. Do not neglect high-yield subjects. It is normal to feel somewhat anxious about retaking the test, but if anxiety becomes a problem, seek appropriate counseling.

## IF YOU FAILED

Even if you came out of the exam room feeling that you failed, seeing that failing grade can be traumatic, and it is natural to feel upset. Different people react in different ways: For some it is a stimulus to buckle down and study harder; for others it may "take the wind out of their sails" for a few days; and it may even lead to a reassessment of individual goals and abilities. In some instances, however, failure may trigger weeks or months of sadness, feelings of hopelessness, social withdrawal, and inability to concentrate—in other words, true clinical depression. If you think you are depressed, please seek help.

## TESTING AGENCIES

- **National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) / USMLE Secretariat**
  Department of Licensing Examination Services
  3750 Market Street
  Philadelphia, PA 19104-3102
  (215) 590-9500 (operator) or
  (215) 590-9700 (automated information line)
  Fax: (215) 590-9457
  Email: webmail@nbme.org
  www.nbme.org

- **Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG)**
  3624 Market Street
  Philadelphia, PA 19104-2685
  (215) 386-5900
  Fax: (215) 386-9196
  Email: info@ecfmg.org
  www.ecfmg.org

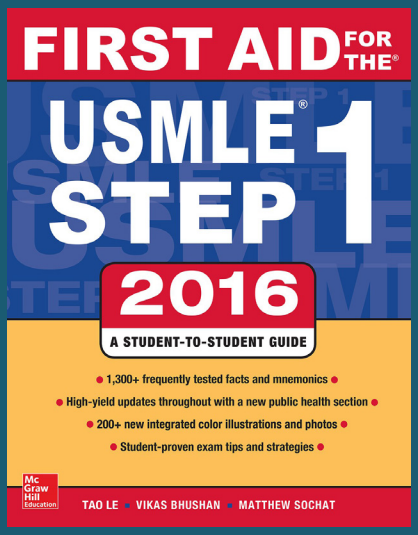
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# Benefit From The World's Most Popular Medical Review Book

For the most thorough USMLE Step 1 test preparation possible, be sure to purchase the 2016 edition of First Aid for the USMLE Step 1. It delivers a comprehensive collection of high-yield facts and mnemonics that highlight everything you must know to pass the exam. Co-authored by medical students who took the boards in 2015, this time-tested resource provides a complete framework for the most effective USMLE Step 1 review possible.




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