

A Student's Experience with USMLE Step 1

What is Step 1 and why is it important?

It is a 350 question 1-day 8 hour long exam. It is divided into 7 hour-long blocks of 50 questions. There is also 1 hour of total allotted break time. However, break can seem shorter during the exam because you need to check in and out each time you leave the room. Step 1 is entirely on a computer that keeps track of time for you. You can use your break time any way you choose, and the break timer keeps track. You can't pause in the middle of a block. First Aid for USMLE has a great explanation of the exam. If you want to become a doctor (and that's why you're here!), it is one of many exams you must pass to become a licensed practicing physician in the U.S. Residency directors also use your Step 1 score as a screening tool for residency selection

How should I study?

The info below is only one student's view on how to study for Step 1. There is no one right way to study for Step 1. Everyone will have a difficult style, strategy, and plan. Decide what score you are aiming for: pass, average, very high, or somewhere in between. This can determine your study plan. Talk to people and find a way that works best for you. The biggest mistakes I think are:

- Not starting soon enough
- Using too many resources
- Using books during the study period that you have never seen before
- Adopting a study strategy that isn't a good fit with your leaning style. (i.e. you are a visual learner but use books without pictures)

The "study period" for Step 1 is not the 3-4 weeks allotted at the end of year 2. It is during the entire 1st and 2nd years, with particular emphasis on year 2. It's a mistake to think that if you didn't learn something well the first time, that you can learn it well during the study period. Studying well for your classes will prepare you for Step 1 and beyond, and preparing for Step 1 can supplement your coursework. I never viewed them as separate. Both were complementary.

Know Yourself. I personally am a horrible memorizer. I have to see/hear/write something several times using many different resources before I understand and retain. I started thinking about Step 1 at the beginning of the 2nd year and set small but realistic goals for myself. I am a procrastinator. I can't sit down and read Lippincott's in one weekend. I needed to break it up in manageable chunks, such as reading a chapter a week to make sure I stay motivated and on track.

Studying with others vs. by yourself. I had a study partner while studying for Step 1. It helped me stay motivated because we had the same study styles and I knew someone would be waiting for me if I didn't get up and around. It was also great having someone to chat with during study breaks. We would read a few pages at a time and then quiz each other verbally on the material until we both learned it. I also studied with the same partner throughout the first two years and it worked well for us. A lot of people studied for Step 1 by themselves and this worked great for them too. Do what is best for you.

Where to begin?

First, I started reading discussions boards on **Studentdoctor.net** and see what other people said about their study plans and books they used. I hated to see when people had this huge list of books. It was too overwhelming. I poked around **Amazon.com** and read the reviews on First Aid, BRS Phys, BRS Phys. I came across a Listmania! List by alias "steveo" entitled "Rock the USMLE Step 1 Using Only 5 Books". That was intriguing to me, so I emailed him and he sent me a document he wrote entitled: "A Student's Perspective On How To Study For Step I", which I have attached to the end of this document. I found his notes very helpful.

What about Kaplan Q-bank?

A tool most people use is Q-bank by Kaplan. It is a 2100+ question database with sample test questions and answer explanations that are excellent for knowledge assessment. It is organized by topic (i.e. physiology, microbiology, pathology) and organ system (cardiology, neuro, renal), etc. It allows you to create 50-question exams based on those parameters and also on questions that you have missed or not done yet, e.g an exam of missed questions of respiratory microbiology. You can also take the blocks in timed or tutor mode. Timed mode simulates a real exam. Tutor mode lets you review the answers as you go and is good for learning. **Read the answer explanations.** The Kaplan folks came and talked to us at the beginning of the year, and offered 9-month subscription to 2nd years at a discount. My manageable goal was to do the organ system relevant questions during the school year as we were covering them in our classes. So after finishing the Cardiology section in Circulation course, I did the 250-some Cardiology questions and read the answers and took notes on what I had missed.

Other practice questions

The other tool that was very useful was the NBME practice exams. Available on nbme.org > "Self-Assessment Services" > "NBME Interactive Website for Self-Assessment Services". Create an account, and then choose "Comprehensive Basic Science Self-Assessment (CBSSA)". There are 4 forms, each costing \$45. Each of the 4 forms has four 50-questions block, so 200 questions per form, 800 questions total. You can choose Standard-Paced (1 hour for each 50-question block, 4 hours per form) or Self-

Paced (4 hours for each 50 question block, 16 hours per form). Solutions are not provided. If you choose the Self-paced version, you can answer the question block in an hour, and then have 3 hours to look up the answers on the web. You can't review the exam once submitted, and you must submit it to get a score. It gives you a score that can reasonably predict your Step 1 score. The questions are different than Kaplan and very much worth doing. Since this costs money, it may be worthwhile to do them during the study period. For more info:

<http://www.nbme.org/programs/sas/sas.asp>

<http://www.nbme.org/programs/sas/essential.asp>

What could I do during the year?

Remember this is only one student's perspective. There are many different ways to study. Ask around what worked for other people and figure out what would work best for you. Here was sort of my plan:

Prior to study period, beginning September:

- Used comprehensive review books to supplement studying for classes, i.e. mostly *First Aid*, *BRS Path*, *BRS Phys*, Lange and Lippincott Flashcards, and also *Step-Up*, *Hi-Yield*, and took notes in them. Goal of getting through the content-related chapters in these books while studying the subjects in class.
- Did the content-relevant Q-bank as I studied the topics during the class (I had completed about 75% by the time the study period began)
- Used *High-Yields* as needed to supplement course work.
- Listened to Goljan lectures during commute to and from school

February

- Read *Clinical Micro Made Simple* in January/February

March

- Took the practice assessment offered at OHSU. Realized how little Biochemistry I knew.
- Read *Lippincott's Biochemistry* starting around March, only ½ to 1 chapter per day

April

- Read the "Immunology" section of *Lange Medical Microbiology and Immunology (Levinson)*
- Started reading *Lippincott's Pharmacology*

Starting around beginning of May

- Started going through First-Aid in detail with study partner. Went over each page methodically and tried to memorize as much as possible. Created a study schedule, using First-Aid chapters as a guide

During Study Period

- Finished going through First Aid. Memorized as much as possible. Made sure I understood as much as possible. Finished a section at a time using First-Aid as an anchor and then supplemented
- Used other review books and class text books as necessary to further explain things I didn't understand in first aid
- Finished Qbank
- Went through High-Yield Embryo, a good aid for embryology and reviewing organ system anatomy and pathology.
- Memorized the virus table in Clinical Micro Ridiculously Simple.
- Did the 4 NBME forms, 1 per week (200 questions per week)
- Did the Kaplan full-length practice exam
- Did 150 Released questions from NBME and reviewed answers (Free)

Time Commitment

To get an estimate of how much time this took me (remember, I am a *slow memorizer*).

Qbank: For me, 2100 questions / 25 questions/hour (including reading answers) = 84 hours, or roughly **100 hours total** to go through Qbank, (I completed 75% of this before June)

High-Yield Embryo: **10 hours**

First Aid: It took me roughly about **150 hours** going through it in tremendous detail

NBME: 4 forms * 4 blocks/form * 4 hours/block = **64 hours**

TOTAL: 325+ hours for Qbank, First Aid, HY, and NBME. Studying 60 hours/week = 5 ½ weeks

Other, not included in above, as were done throughout the year before May:

Goljan Lectures 40 hours

Clinical Micro Made Ridiculously Simple 20 hours

Lippincott's Biochemistry 30 hours

Lippincott's Pharmacology 30 hours

(only finished 1/3 of this, 30hours
an estimate for the whole book)

BRS Path 20 hours

Lange Medical Microbiology and Immunology (Levinson) 10 hours

(Immunology section only)

ADDITIONAL TIME TOTAL: 150 hours

Starting early helps. To get through the 150 hours, studying 1 hour per day is about 22 weeks, or 5 to 6 months. I tried to be creative and find less monotonous way to study. I put the Goljan lectures on my iPod and listened to them on my commute to and from school (40 minutes total) and then would try to read for ½ hour before I went to bed. I made small goals, and only tried to read ½ to 1 chapter per night, so I would finish a book in about 6 weeks. I would only do questions blocks of 25 question or so at a time. I retained more and it was easier to stay focused.

Our study period was 5 weeks long. If you want to take a vacation, like many of us did, and I highly recommend, that leaves about 4 weeks, which was how long I studied. So that required me to study before the study period started. I probably ended up studying 60 hours/week for 3 ½ weeks during the studying period and then took a ½ week to review and relax. You may take more or less time. Figure out how much time you will need and plan accordingly.

Balance

Yes, Step 1 is important. But your health, well-being, happiness, and family cannot be neglected. No score or amount of studying is worth it if you lose the things in your life that are most important to you. Remember to get enough sleep, eat well, exercise, spend time with your friends and family, and continue to pursue outside activities and interests that are important to you.

Books

This book lists reflects where my weaknesses were. For example, I know biochemistry, microbiology, and immunology were weak for me, so I studied that more. Books that I used:

- *First Aid*
- *BRS Path*
- *Lippincott's Biochemistry*
 - Read after Circulation and Metabolism
- Goljan's Pathology Audio lectures (available on ebay)
 - 40 hours of Pathology lectures. Very funny and entertaining! I put these on my iPod and listened to them on my commute to and from school.
- *Lange Pathology Flashcards*
 - Used these throughout the school year. Very helpful for classes.
- *Clinical Microbiology made Ridiculously Simple.*
 - Re-read this around mid-year. Made a lot more sense after Circulation and Metabolism.
- *Hi-Yield* - I used an assortment of these, specifically *High-Yield Embryo*. Good, easy reads.

- *Step-Up*
- *Medical Microbiology & Immunology*, Warren Levinson

Flashcards (The ** are the ones I used the most, but all are pretty good)

Lange

***Lange Pathology Flashcards*, Barron, Lee

Lange Pharmacology Flashcards, Baron

Lange Microbiology and Infectious Disease Flashcards, Bos, Somers

Lippincott

***Microcards*, Harpavat, Nissim

***Pharmcards*, Johannsen, Sabatine

***Pathcards*, Marcucci,

Some Useful Websites:

http://www2.uic.edu/stud_orgs/hon/aoa/usmle1-15.shtml

http://www2.uic.edu/stud_orgs/hon/aoa/usmle.shtml

<http://medinfo.ufl.edu/~med2007/year2/boards.ppt>

A Student's Perspective On How To Study For Step I

Basically, take my advice for what it is worth...I did well on Step I but I could probably take that test again ten times and not get the same score. If you study hard and know the material, you will probably break 240, but the difference between 240 and 265 is luck.

That being said, preparing for this exam is not a six week endeavor (well it is if your only goal is to pass) and it should technically start at the beginning of second year. That doesn't mean you should be putting in time studying for any of the first year subjects during second year, rather you need to learn the second material really well and in a clinical context so that you aren't learning any new information or associating a disease with its symptoms for the first time when the six weeks of hell rolls around. 70-80% of the material on this exam is from the second year, so this is where your money is. I believe the single biggest reason I did well was because when boards study time came around, I didn't even have to look at the two biggest subjects the exam (Micro & Path) because I already knew them cold (don't get me wrong I still looked at these subjects, I just wasn't relearning material or learning material for the first time...it was all just reinforcing the material I already knew). The reason I feel I was able to do this was because I used very good resources to study during the second year that approached these subjects from a clinical perspective. This way when it came time for boards I was (1) using resources that I already knew were good and (2) I had been using these resources the whole year so I was already familiar with them (ie they were already full of my own notes and highlighting). Hopefully this makes sense but you wouldn't believe how many people start purchasing new books right before studying for boards and then spend half of their time learning how to use the book and/or making your own notes in the margin. All boards studying is supposed to be review, and I wouldn't even bother using a book that you haven't already read at least once if you are in the hardcore boards study period.

Finally, this exam is not like other standardized exams that you've taken up to this point (SAT or MCAT) because your score is not predetermined before you walk in the door. There are a lot of people in my class much smarter than I, and I did better than all of them on this exam. This is a knowledge-based exam and there really aren't any tricks...if you know the information well, you will do well (as opposed to the MCAT where you could study your ass off and still come in at an 8 on the verbal). Resources are listed in the order of how useful I felt they were in preparing for Step I. Remember, this is all just my take on how things are; each person needs to find out what works for them. Good luck.

-C.S

Class of 2007

First Aid for the USMLE Step I

The absolute best book for Step I. Get it early and use it w/ your second year courses. Every line printed in this book (even the ones that seem like random facts) is high yield. It is updated every year to reflect the changes on the exam; 2006 version to be released in December. There is a reason this book is universally used by all med students...it's that good. This is the only book I used for Pharm, Biochem, Embryo, Anatomy, Neuro, and Behavioral Science/Biostats.

Basically 90% of the questions you could or will be asked on these subjects are in this book; there are additional books out there that are more thorough and probably contain the extra 10% of material not in First Aid, but in my opinion it would be much more beneficial to know First Aid inside and out than to know 70% of First Aid and use an additional book on the same subject. Probably the biggest reason why everyone uses First Aid and not everyone does well on this exam is that the key to using this book is UNDERSTANDING (and not just memorizing) the facts in it. It will have facts like "an associated finding in patient's with Conn's syndrome is a concurrent metabolic alkalosis." And sure you can memorize this little fact but boards doesn't

want to know the *what* (ie metabolic alkalosis finding) they want to know the *why* (aldosterone stimulates a proton pump in the collecting ducts to pump hydrogen ions from the plasma into the urine, so excess aldosterone results in more acidic urine and more alkalotic plasma).

Also, someone gave me the 2004 version of First Aid put to notecards on MS Word documents, so if you want the docs let me know; I found them pretty useful.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0071440674/ref=cm_bg_f_1/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance

ISBN #0071440674

Goljan Lecture Series For The USMLE Step I

Five days of multidisciplinary lecture with most emphasis on pathology. Unbelievable how much Dr. Goljan knows about Step I and how right on he is. Worth listening to at least two to three times...just hard to find the time unless you want to listen to path lectures while at the gym or while driving (which would probably accelerate the course to insanity rather than bump up your score). I have these lectures on mp3, so drop me an email and I'll make you a copy. These lectures are very valuable.

Microcards

Best resource out there for microbiology for both Step I and the second year course. Very high recall value (the information sticks with you) especially if you use the clinical scenarios written on the front of every card. Everything you could want or be expected to know about the bugs and their respective diseases is on these cards. Don't get these for Step I if you haven't been using them all year, it would be a waste of your time...they need to be bought in the beginning of second year and used with the course. The flow charts on the front of each section alone make these cards high yield enough to buy (by the way, you should memorize and commit these flow charts to memory when you study the respective bugs...it is unbelievable how much time this will save you when you starts studying and how many attending you will impress third year when a sputum gram stain shows gram positive rods and the attending asks you which bugs it could be and you rattle off 10 species like it was nothing).

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0781722004/qid=1123430567/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_ur_2_1/002-7066749-0432026

ISBN # 0781722004

Pathology Flash Cards

Everyone raves about BRS Path but these cards are where I felt the money was for path. Every card has a clinical scenario on the front and all the major pathology on the back (etiology and epidemiology, gross and micro pathology, clinical manifestations, treatment, and extra random facts about the disease). My step one exam had very few obscure diseases/syndromes and I would say 95% of the path questions I was asked were covered on these cards. Very good resource but only if bought in the beginning of second year, otherwise they would take too much time to use. These cards are fairly new so they haven't gotten the publicity that BRS Path has yet but eventually they will be considered a necessity for all taking path.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0071436901/qid=1123430612/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance&s=books

ISBN #0071436901

BRS Pathology

Everyone knows about this book and everyone uses it for good reason. Clear, concise, and all the info you need for path. More comprehensive than the path cards (but path cards have higher yield/recall value). Questions and comprehensive exam are also very good.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0683302655/qid=1123430137/sr=2-3/ref=pd_bbs_b_ur_2_3/002-7066749-0432026

ISBN #0683302655

BRS Physiology

BRS Physiology is the gold standard for studying phys. This is the only first year subject really tested in depth on Step I; good to know it cold. The way the questions on physio are asked on Step I is in the context of diseases; for example, they would give a scenario of a person who has a small cell carcinoma of the lung and is experiencing signs and symptoms of hyponatremia (headache, dizziness, altered mental status, ect.) and at the end of the scenario they may or may not tell you that this person was diagnosed with SIADH (if they don't you are supposed to assume since the scenario is classic). Then, they'll ask something about renal phys and fluid shifting between compartments (serum osmolality would be decreased and both the ICF and ECF expanded) or how hyponatremia causes cerebral edema (water movement from ECF into cells of the brain causing swelling). It is very rare to have a physio question that doesn't ask about the pathophysiology of disease, so while it's important to know the normal, most of the questions will be on how deviations from normal physiology manifest as signs and symptoms of a disease.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0781739195/qid=1123430137/sr=2-1/ref=pd_bbs_b_ur_2_1/002-7066749-0432026

ISBN #0781739195

Other Stuff You Can Buy If You Have The Cash And/Or Time

Micro & Immuno Review

Good book but too much writing and so you should probably only use it to study for the immunology section of your microbiology course. Otherwise, this book is most useful for the assload of questions it has on each subject (virology, immunology, ect.). I did use this book for boards but only to study immunology and I only reread the sections on hypersensitivity reactions and immune deficiencies (which covers over 80% of all the immuno questions they'll ask on boards).

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0071382178/qid=1123430486/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance&s=books

ISBN #0071431993

USMLE Step I Secrets

The way the boards are written is that they write a case scenario and then write five or six questions that could be asked about the case (anything from what is the diagnosis to what is the mechanism of virulence of the bug that causes this disease to what drug would you give to treat this disease); you and the person next to you might get the same case scenario but be asked totally different questions about that case. This book is set up just like that; there is a case followed by six or seven questions on the case and their answers. It is most useful because you can see how they could ask multidiscipline questions on the same case (so it helps you see how they could ask pharm, phys, biochem, and path questions on the same case). This book is divided into systems and so its perfect for boards studying.

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1560535709/qid=1123571949/sr=8-2/ref=pd_bbs_sbs_2/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance&s=books&n=507846

ISBN #1560535709

Platinum Vignettes

Much better than the Underground Clinical Vignettes series (which if you use the UCVs you'll find out just how much they suck within the first day). These books give 'classic' presentations for diseases and bugs causing disease which is what they expect you to know on Step I. Also, unlike the UCVs the answers are not printed on the same page as the case so you can actually think about the case and come up with a diagnosis rather than having it given to you. The behavioral science book in this series was especially useful. Dr. Brochert is the king of USMLE exams; his books for step II and step III are to these exams what First Aid is to the step I exam (he doesn't have a step I book out, so these are as close as it comes).

http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1560535741/qid=1123430769/sr=1-3/ref=sr_1_3/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance&s=books

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http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/1560535768/qid=1123430879/sr=1-12/ref=sr_1_12/002-7066749-0432026?v=glance&s=books

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