Disclaimer

Data included in this guide is combined from several sources, including the NBME website, journal articles obtained via PubMed and the responses to a survey sent to the students of the Class of 2007. The information provided in this document is as current as possible, however, it is likely that changes will occur, so it will always be best for students to independently verify scheduling, cost and procedural information.

The best source of information regarding the USMLE will always be the NBME website or publications.

My hope is that students will continue to provide feedback so that this document can be updated, expanded and improved to meet the needs of all students on a yearly basis, so please contact me via e-mail with questions, comments and suggestions.

I would like to give a final thanks to the Office of Student Affairs for working with me to make this guide a reality and for making it available to students via their website.

I wish you the best of luck as you prepare for Step 1!

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This guide is a summary of comments, experiences and thoughts from students of the Class of 2007 and is meant to serve as a starting point for preparing for Step 1 of the USMLE. It also contains answers to the “I wish I’d known that!” questions that came up during students’ preparation. Realize that everyone has their own opinion as to the best way for structuring study time, and what works for one person may not be right for others. So, what’s most important to remember is that you should pick and choose from the suggestions listed in this guide based upon how you study and learn – it’s what got you into medical school, so it’s worked so far!

Contents

I. Approach to the USMLE
   1. Long or Short Haul?
   2. The Kaplan Hard Sell
   3. MCAT = USMLE?
   4. Know Your Enemy
   5. Know Yourself
   6. I’m Already Freaked, What Do I Do?

II. Getting Ready
   1. Registration, Cost and Rules
   2. Topic Breakdown (or High-Yield Studying)
   3. Suggested Study Plans
      a. Slow and Steady
      b. Classes and Concentration
      c. Last Minute Cramming
   4. Resources
   5. Hints for Balance

III. The Test Day
   1. Should I Do the Practice Session?
   2. Logistics
   3. Time Management
   4. Do’s and Don’ts
   5. After the Exam

IV. The Waiting Is the Hardest Part
   1. Expected Wait for Results
   2. What Do I Do with the Results?
   3. What Do They Mean?

V. Final Thoughts
I. Approach to the USMLE

1. Long or Short Haul?

Some students choose to study little-by-little throughout the second year, reviewing old material as they learn new material. While this works for some, others find it time consuming to go back and review (and sometimes relearn) old material like Anatomy and Embryology as well as find it difficult to manage the high volume of information in the second year. In addition, some material, like Genetics and Epidemiology, does not meld easily into a systems-based review. Some of the systems-based board review books (like Step Up), may make this easier in that they have already integrated the material for you. Unfortunately, there is always material that will not make it into the big-picture board review books. Most of the subject-specific books are overly thorough and not engineered for rapid, high-yield review in the days leading up to the exam. Instead, most are designed to be used as supplements to your coursework, which would be another advantage to choosing them early and using them during your second year, perhaps even in place of the course text. Another alternative that many students found useful was to review First Aid during the year to (1) help discern what material is emphasized on the USMLE (believe it or not, what you are tested on in your classes may not be important to the NBME) and (2) to identify concepts or topics typically covered on the USMLE that are not covered in the MSI/II curricula. The last 2-3 weeks before the exam is the wrong time to be trying to learn new material, so it is important to recognize knowledge gaps while there is still time to incorporate it into your study plans.

Other students chose to essentially ignore the USMLE during the second year and just study for their classes. The courses that employ the cumulative final help to facilitate this study method; however, Pharmacology (and Pathology for this year I have heard) and Pathophysiology do not offer cumulative finals, so you have to be your own boss in reviewing this material. This approach did work for some, but they also had to devote significant time in the post-final period to organizing not only review for their MSI but also some of their MSII courses. Discipline becomes the key to success regardless of how you choose to study. Many of the people who did study in this fashion noted that they wished they had started using First Aid earlier in the year for the same reasons given above.

2. The Kaplan Hard Sell

By now, Kaplan has probably done their presentation to your class about all of the services that they offer. They also do a wonderful job of inciting anxiety in many students. Some of them then purchased the 9 month book and Q-Bank package or the video instruction package or the web instruction package at significant cost. Kaplan can be very useful for some people; however, I would caution everyone to seriously consider how much time they believe they will spend in preparing for the USMLE during the majority of the second year. Kaplan can be very time consuming, and a portion of the students who purchased Kaplan products wound up not utilizing them fully due to time constraints with studying for classes, etc. Many students waited until Spring Break or later to start studying for the USMLE, with the majority of them putting in a final sprint of studying in the last 2-4 weeks before the exam. Q-Bank was cited by almost every student as a good study tool for (1) presenting questions with similar content and format to the USMLE and/or (2) allowing them to develop the stamina required to sit at a computer and
answer questions for hours at a time. A few students did comment that they did not feel that the Q-Bank questions were indicative of either the content or level of difficulty of the questions encountered on the USMLE. Others decided to share Kaplan products to cut down the cost of the materials and this worked well for the videos and books. A few shared Q-Bank but cautioned that you should limit the number who share to two and to know that you will not be as able to keep track of the questions you got right or wrong as you would if you purchased it for your sole use. Most students did purchase the 3 month package with a few doing the 1 month package.

3. MCAT = USMLE?

I will keep this section short except to say that the only documented predictor of USMLE performance (and far from a definitive predictor at that) is your MCAT performance, not because the material or the questions are very similar but rather because it is another high-stakes standardized test performed in a relatively high-stress environment. The good news is that if you performed well on the MCAT and well in your first two years, you will likely do fine on the USMLE. The bad news is that there are no guarantees, and honoring everything in the first two years does not guarantee a stellar USMLE score; nor does not honoring anything in the first two years doom you to a lackluster USMLE score. Your course exam format and the USMLE format are largely very different and require a different approach for success. Preparation and familiarity with the exam becomes far more important in the long run.

4. Know Your Enemy

The first rule of warfare is to know your enemy – in this case the guys who write the USMLE. Dr. Shikes hopefully has given you an introduction to the mindset of the exam writers, so what I say here may be a little redundant. The good news is that the exam is written so that 92% of test takers pass the exam. UCHSC tends to run about 95% as a first-time pass rate. That means the expectation should be that with the right preparation you will pass the exam. Merely passing may not be enough for some students who desire entry into very competitive residency programs, but this fact should buoy you as you prepare. The exam is long (up to 8 hours in duration depending on how fast you take it), which presents a challenge in and of itself, and the questions are written such that many of them require you to “connect the dots.” There are some straightforward questions that ask directly for an answer. Those questions are designed such that the vast majority of students will get them right. You should make every effort to maximize your performance on these questions as First Aid tends to be a great source for the answers. There are more advanced questions however, which require you to read a short vignette with the answer to the question being several steps away and not always related to the vignette. An (extreme) example:

1. A 25 year old female comes in to see you complaining of shortness of breath several hours in duration. On physical examination, you note bilateral expiratory wheezes and use of accessory breathing muscles. Her peak expiratory flow is 50% of expected for her age and gender. Which of the following drugs is most contraindicated in this patient?

   A. Propranolol
   B. Metoprolol
C. Atenolol
D. Acebutol

This question requires you to (1) make the diagnosis (asthma), (2) stop, reboot and figure out that all of the drugs are beta blockers, (3) figure out why beta receptors are important in asthmatics (namely that beta-2 receptors keep the smooth muscles in the airways relaxed) and (4) decide which of the named receptors has the most activity at beta-2 receptors (propranolol) such that blockade would result in smooth muscle contraction and airway compromise.

It is also important to realize that about 50 of the 350 questions are “pilot” questions that NBME is trying out. These questions are not graded and do not figure into your score. Some of them will be obvious because (1) they are on a topic you have never heard of, (2) they are poorly written with grammatical, spelling or structural errors or (3) they have no clear cut right or wrong answers. If you get a series of these questions, do not let it demoralize you.

5. Know Yourself

Now is not the time to change how you study. Whatever has been working for you for the last twenty-plus years will carry you through this exam. If you do not learn well from flash cards, do not start using them now just because 80% of your classmates are doing so. If you study best by yourself, do not feel pressured to join study groups. Of course, if you want to try something new in the way of studying, go ahead and do so. If it works, that is great. If not, quit and move on. The point is to avoid wasting precious time in non-productive activities. You should also avoid “toxic friends.” By this I mean avoid people who make you nervous or doubt yourself. Similarly, avoid people who insist there is only one way to study. When planning your exam date, consider carefully the fact that your third year will be very intense time-wise, and your time between finals and Transitions to Third Year (TTTY) will be your only vacation between your second year and late September. Decide how much time you want off and schedule your exam date and study accordingly. No one who answered the survey said they wished they had taken less time off between the exam and TTTY. 50% of students actually wished they had taken more time off because they did not anticipate the fast pace and demanding schedules of the third year; and, greater than 95% of students who responded were satisfied with their score. Another thing to consider is what rotation you will start with as some are more demanding than others (e.g. Medicine, Surgery, OB/GYN). Most students took 1-2 weeks off prior to TTTY, with only a few taking 2-3 weeks. You should have more time between finals and TTTY built into your schedule, so hopefully you will not have to make as much of a trade-off in stress over not studying enough versus getting a nice break.

6. I’m Already Freaked, What Do I Do?

First, calm down (see number 4 above – 95% of us pass). Second, making a schedule and creating a to-do list can be extremely therapeutic for the Type A personality. Honestly assess what your goals are with regards to course grades and your score. You can do well at both; it just takes proactivity and discipline to balance those sometimes competing interests. Try to find a friend in the third or fourth year classes who is like you in their goals and approach to learning and studying. They are going to be one of the best resources for you. Also, avoid asking
everyone for their opinion – you will wind up buying a whole lot of study books and/or investing a lot of time in low-yield activities, or just not getting started because you wind up even more confused than you were to start with. Finally, realize that the exam is still months away, and you are neither the first nor the only one to ever go through this process. It will be okay.

II. Getting Ready

1. Registration, Cost and Rules

When should I register?

The NBME will not issue a scheduling permit (which is the orange document you have to have to schedule your exam date with Prometric) until 6 months prior to the start of your eligibility period. For most students, this is a three month window that is either April-June or May-July. So, it’s pointless to register before that 6 month mark. Be aware that it will take NBME 2-3 weeks to process your application. You will go to the NBME website to begin the registration process and will have to enter a bunch of information to get a user ID and password. Don’t lose this as it will be the same login you will have for Steps 2 and 3. Once you have completed the online application and paid, you can print out a form that you will have to take to Student Affairs. You will have to have a 2x2 inch passport photo to affix to this certification form. Student Affairs will then certify that you are indeed a UCDHSC student in good academic standing and then mail that form on to NBME. Once NBME has that form, it only takes a few days for them to process your application. You can use the aforementioned login on the NBME website to check the status of your application. At that point, assuming you are within 6 months of your eligibility date, they will send you an orange scheduling permit. DO NOT LOSE THIS PERMIT. It looks like junk mail, and several of my classmates (or their significant others) threw it out. One of my classmates even had to go dumpster diving to get his permit just before the exam as they will not let you take the exam without it. If you do lose it for some reason, contact the NBME as soon as possible and have your scheduling permit reissued.

Next, you will have to schedule your exam on the Prometric website (Thomson Prometric to be exact). Once you pick the date, be sure that you move it at least 5 business days prior to your exam date if you decide you want to take the exam earlier or later. If you get within 5 business days, you will have to pay a steep rescheduling fee. It is free if you prior to 5 business days before the exam. You should have no trouble getting the exam date you want, or the site, if you register several months before the exam. You can make reservations and changes either via the 800 number or their website. If you do desire to change your test date, be sure to try both if one method is unsuccessful. The website may be a little time-delayed, as opposed to the 800 number, which is real-time. There are several sites around the Metro Denver area (and don’t forget Colorado Springs). Some students even preferred more distant sites as they preferred not to have other stressed-out classmates around them on exam day. Most students use the Greenwood Village location, but keep the additional sites at the back of your mind.
What does it cost?

The exam appears to get a little more expensive every year. I believe the estimate for this year is $465, but be sure to check the USMLE Bulletin and website for that information. Credit cards are accepted. Last year they did take checks, but it does slow down the application process considerably as they wait for the check to clear before processing your application.

What are the rules?

Don’t lose your scheduling permit, and expect the process to be convoluted. Also, remember that the name on whatever ID you are going to be using (and it has to be a state or federal government issued ID) has to match exactly the name on your orange permit. If not, Prometric has the option of turning you away, although my classmates with this problem (one had gotten married, another had a spelling problem on their middle name) were still allowed to take the test by Prometric despite NBME’s threats to the contrary. The only exception NBME allows is letting you use your middle initial on the ID versus the full name they require on your application. If you do notice there is a problem with name, address or other identifying information, take care of it early with NBME on their website by filing a change of information form available on their website.

2. Topic Breakdown (or High-Yield Studying)

The USMLE in their bulletin publishes a topic breakdown by organ system and subject. You should review this information as you begin to study in earnest for the exam. The most-represented areas of the exam are Pathology and Pharmacology (40%+ together) with a lesser component of Pathophysiology/Physiology (another 20%). Biochemistry and Genetics make up another 15-20% of the exam. Subjects such as Anatomy, Histology, Epidemiology, Nutrition and Embryology tend to represent a much smaller portion of the exam (maybe 10-15% total for all of them). Of 300 graded questions, you can see that studying the high-yield areas in depth makes much more sense than spending a month relearning Embryology for what might be 2 or 3 exam questions. Of course, you should not ignore any topic; I am just suggesting you be realistic about allotting your limited study time.

3. Suggested Study Plans

a. Slow and Steady

This approach was advocated by those who liked to go to class and to study a little bit at a time. They tended to want to do well in their classes and thus did not want to have to compromise course grades for success on the USMLE. Many of these students used the approach of reviewing first year material as each organ system was covered in the second year. They also tended to use their board review books as either primary or supplemental texts to their classes. Many of these students used First Aid to mark concepts for study. These students employed a last minute push, but it generally was shorter than that attempted by the students who preferred a shorter study schedule. These students also generally took about 2 weeks of vacation prior to TTY rather than the 1 week taken by other students.
b. Classes and Concentration

Most students wanted to focus solely on their classes during the academic year and then spend 2-3 weeks studying in earnest after finals were over. These students generally concentrated on a few specific resources (e.g. First Aid, Step Up, BRS Pathology, etc.) during their USMLE study time rather than buying a large number of board review texts and attempting to plow through them in their limited time with some even commenting that they had bought too many books “in a panic” and then never used a portion of them. Some students have the stamina for 12 hour study days, however, do not expect to be able to do that for weeks on end. Also, having a study plan mapped out was deemed to be very helpful as it allowed them to maximize the efficiency of their study time. Of course, a decent percentage of these students also said they had spent more time utilizing First Aid as they went along. The Student Affairs guide has some sample study programs available that can serve as an excellent starting point for organizing your study plan; however, some students may find that using the NBME subject matter breakdown to allot hours of study useful.

c. Last Minute Cramming

Other students combined the extended vacation of the slow and steady plan with the focus on their classes of the concentration plan by intentionally limiting themselves to one week after finals to prepare for the exam and then accepting their grade come what may. This may not be the optimal method for anyone attempting to match in Dermatology; however, it did work for some students. Those contemplating a lengthy pre-third-year trip (or getting married during the break) might consider this option. No one seemed to regret their decision, and satisfaction with scores was universal. Once again, having a plan in place ahead of time is the key to success.

4. Resources

What is contained here is a list of the resources deemed to be most valuable by students (with the most frequently referenced materials at the top of the list). If you wish to live in a cost-effective world, the top 2-3 should be considered “must-haves” with the other texts being useful but not essential. Also included is a list of non-text resources that students found helpful. Again, you must remember that your time will be limited, so reading a 600 page Pharm review will likely not be possible in the 2-3 weeks between finals and boards if you plan to study anything else; but a quick trip through BRS Pathology, especially if you have already been through it once or twice, may be beneficial. One final reminder: the bookstore does not allow you to return board materials. If you are not sure you want, need or will use a book, do not buy it from the bookstore. Many students rued their last minute “panic” purchases, so avoid them if at all possible. However, if you must give in to the beast, do it where you can return anything you do not want or use.

Suggested Texts:
First Aid (everyone listed this one)
Step Up to USMLE Step 1
BRS Pathology
BRS Physiology
5. Hints for Balance

As indicated before, most people cannot sustain 12 hour study days for weeks on end. Many preferred an 8 hour day with time for exercise and recreation built in. Other students preferred to use a “rewards” system to motivate them to study. One student commented that for a certain period of dedicated study time, the reward was a pedicure or a trip to Starbucks or the like. Other students intentionally scheduled time with family and/or friends such that they would be forced to take breaks. Students who did attempt to keep studying for extraordinarily long periods of time commented that they reached a point of burnout relatively quickly in the process and did not recommend attempting it. General advice seems to be make the time you do spend studying as productive and focused as possible, however, if you notice that you are having trouble paying attention to the material or find yourself reading the same paragraph 22 times to understand the words, it is time to stop and regroup. Be sure to build in time for exercise, healthy meals, friends, the occasional indulgence and sleep. Sleep will be a precious commodity in the third year, so do not wear yourself out gearing up for the USMLE.

III. The Test Day

1. Should I Do the Practice Session?

For a price, Prometric will allow you to go to the test facility where you will be taking the exam and take a 150 question practice test. Those 150 questions are the same questions that you download from the NBME website, so you will not be gaining any additional practice materials.
by taking the practice exam. That said, some students found it helpful in reducing stress to actually be able to make and time the drive to the test site and to get the experience of the exam as well as to learn what the test facility looks like, what they provide, etc. Other students said that they would rather not have known and regretted the cost of the practice session. Hopefully, my description of the test site and the test day will answer a lot of questions for you; but, if the option of taking a test drive still appeals to you, know that some students found it useful.

2. Logistics

The day will be an early one. You will have to be at the site at the time specified on your orange ticket. You will go into the Prometric site and go to the front desk, where they will check your orange ticket and verify it against your ID. You may have a wait of 15-30 minutes as there will be people taking all kinds of exams there with you and they have to take you back to the processing area one at a time. You will be called back to the processing area and be given access to what I remember as a 12x12x12 inch locker where you should put everything but your ID, which you will need to get in and out. You can store food in the lockers if you like. There is a little sandwich shop type place in the first floor of the Greenwood Village Prometric facility, however, I would recommend bringing your own food/snacks and storing them either in your car or in your locker. You will be digitally photographed and have to verify your information with a Prometric staff member prior to being shown to your computer workstation. The testing area will be cold, so I recommend wearing a sweater or sweatshirt into the room at first. You cannot carry anything in your arms, so you will have to wear it. You can take it off once you are at your workstation should you get warm. Prometric will provide you with earmuffs (the big Mickey Mouse ones) and with 4 laminated sheets of paper and dry erase markers for making notes. You will be allowed to come and go as you need to between sections of the exam as long as you stay within the break time allotted and will have full access to your locker during those breaks.

One last caution is that the computers do tend to go down from time to time at the Prometric site. While this is temporally disconcerting, in the vast majority of cases they are able to reboot and accommodate all test takers the same day. In the event that the exam must be rescheduled, you do have the right to insist that they reschedule you in the next few days and not charge you for doing so. Online reports indicate that enough vehemence on your part will even prompt them to allow you to take the exam (1) at another local site or (2) on a weekend day for no additional cost.

3. Time Management

The day is a long one, so managing your time well is the key to maintaining a grip on your sanity. Some people finished the exam in as little as 4 hours; others took the full 8 hours to finish. Regardless, there are things you can do to minimize stress. First, use the NBME practice test to familiarize yourself with the FRED system before you show up for the exam. This will prevent you from having to complete the introductory section of the exam and automatically adds 15 minutes to your break time. Any time you finish a section of the exam prior to the 50 minutes allotted, that time will be added to your break time. You may take the break time in any fashion you choose provided it is between question blocks. Even 5 minute breaks will be useful in refreshing your eyes between question sets, although some students finished blocks quickly
enough that they were able to finish 2 at a time before taking breaks. One marathoner actually just took all 7 blocks straight through, according to the Prometric folks anyway. Resist the urge to use every minute of every block if you finish early. You will be far too tempted to start changing answers and second-guessing yourself. Better to do a quick review and move on.

4. Do’s and Don’ts

Do make a practice run in rush hour traffic to your test site on the day of the week you will be taking your test so that you can calculate travel-time accurately.

Do watch the morning coffee consumption as you will have to make it through at least one set of 50 questions before you can take a bathroom break.

Do bring some snacks and drinks, if not a full meal.

Do bring a sweater or sweatshirt to wear.

Do take frequent breaks from the computer. Your eyes will thank you later.

Do take some time for lunch if you are going to be there past noon. There are some nice shady patches outside the Greenwood Village and Colorado Springs facilities to enjoy.

Do turn off your cell phone before you put it in your locker or, better yet, leave it in your car.

Don’t forget your orange ticket and ID.

Don’t attempt to study during your lunch and/or breaks.

Don’t click on the clock at the top of the computer screen. It causes a test irregularity to be recorded.

Don’t plan on celebrating after the exam. I would expect to be mentally and physically exhausted. If you happen to feel great, enjoy; but, try to avoid making huge celebratory plans for that night.

5. After the Exam

So, now that you have completed the exam, what do you do? You likely will not feel much like hitting the town, but you should expect to need to spend a little time “winding down”. Some students took their exams with friends so that they would have someone to commiserate with. Be warned – this may be a dual-edged sword. Your exam experience and content will be very different from everyone else taking their exam that day (you are getting 350 of thousands of potential questions in the NBME database), so do not let yourself be psyched out by other people’s reports. Make a pact not to talk about the exam (although this will be next to impossible to actually keep). Bask in the warmth that is completing the USMLE and rest assured
that almost no one walks out of the exam feeling as if they are the king of the world. Remember that 95% of us pass the first time and work on enjoying your break before starting the third year.

IV. The Waiting Is the Hardest Part

1. Expected Wait for Results

NBME’s official position is that you should expect a wait of 6 weeks for your score report. They will provide updates on this on their website. You can use the same tracking website you used for your registration to see when your scores are released. They are mailed on Wednesday of each week, and we GENERALLY have them by Friday although sometimes the letter is delayed over the weekend. Last year, NBME was transitioning to the FRED testing system, so anyone taking the exam on or after June 1 did not get their scores until late July. Those taking their exams prior to June 1 tended to get their scores in about 3 weeks. Hopefully, your experience will be a shorter wait rather than longer. The schools do get the information in a data update on Wednesday, so Student Affairs has your score information several days before you do. They do attempt to contact those students who failed the exam because some of the students will receive their scores over the Medicine clerkship’s first transition weekend and may not want to report to their second clerkship site. The NBME prohibits the release of written score information to students by schools, and it is the Office of Student Affairs’ policy not to verbally release passing score information. The bottom line is that “no news is good news,” so please do not get caught up in the urge to bombard the Office of Student Affairs with requests for your score on Wednesday.

2. What Do I Do with the Results?

When you get your passing score (>182), take a deep breath and be happy. You’ve passed a major milestone in your medical school education. Then, realize that the national average is 215 give or take a few points in any given year. The standard deviation ranges from 12-17 depending on the year. If you do not pass, you will be contacted by Student Affairs. They will offer to go over your results with you and help you plan your study efforts. You may also want to consider the offer of a formal board preparation course. You will have the option of stopping at the point you receive your results or finishing your current rotation and then taking the next 6 weeks off. Student Affairs will also help you with coordinating your scheduling issues. You can sit for the exam again approximately 3 months after taking the initial exam, thus you will both have time to finish your current rotation and prepare adequately should that be your choice.

3. What Do They Mean?

Depending on what specialty or residency program you prefer, the score you “need” may vary greatly. The reality is that great clerkship performance and a good work ethic and attitude will go a long way towards counteracting an average score in all but the most competitive programs and specialties. So, I guess what I am saying is do not panic if your score is not as high as you would like. Even in more competitive programs or specialties, expanding your list of prospective sites can help to ensure that you maximize your chances for match. And, realistically, everyone will match somewhere in what they want to do.
V. Final Thoughts

The USMLE is not the end of the world, no matter what happens. Try to keep this in mind as you begin preparation in earnest. The third and fourth year classes have been there and have empathy for you. Please do not hesitate to use those resources available to you (like the upperclasses, your peers, faculty, etc.). Be organized and methodical in your approach to studying and do not forget the mind set of the test writers. Try to remember that much (but not all ☺) of the information on the USMLE will be important as you begin to care for patients in your third year, and hopefully that will help you keep the right perspective as you study. We wish you the best of luck and success, and we will see you on the wards!