

# Preparation and Feedback Advice for USMLE, Step 1

## From the Class of 2004

A poll was taken from UCD students with the top 15 scores for June 2002 administration of the USMLE step 1. Eighty-six percent of those polled responded and their comments have been combined if their advice was duplicated. Please use accordingly.

### 1. Aside from First-Aid, what books (top 5) would you say were most helpful with your studies? Were these books good for reference/resource, or should they be MASTERED?

Besides First Aid some topics need their own review book.

- BRS Pathology

**Pathology and Physiology board review series books. I would say master the pathology**

- High Yield Gross Anatomy

Review your syllabus for anatomy, this has enough detail to be more than sufficient  
.An Embryology review book. The thinnest one that they sell at the bookstore (I can't remember the name, is more than enough)

- High Yield Biochemistry

- Lippincott, Biochemistry

Biochemistry review book by Lippincott is a must for the biochemistry Section and the visual aids are especially helpful

- BRS Physiology
- Microbiology Made Ridiculously Simple/Lange Micro Book
- High Yield – Behavioral Science
- Step-Up - master
- BRS Cell Biology and Histology – master

### Comments

I don't think this is for everyone, but I read a review book for each discipline (Lippincott's Pharm, Lippincott's Biochem, Hi Yield Behavioural Science, UCV Anatomy + Hi Yield Embryo + Hi Yield Neurobiology, BRS Physio, and Micro Ridiculously Simple) while taking notes in my First AID. It took about a week or two per subject (I tried to alternate subjects I liked with those I didn't). (For Path I just read First AID and looked at the pictures on the Utah website). At the end of the subject I went back and read the section in First Aid with all the notes. During the week before the test I reread my First AID. (I read Step up for a couple of areas (Heme/Onc and Connective Tissue/Derm which are not covered well in First AID, overall though, I don't think Step Up has enough info and there are quite a few mistakes). I also liked Buzzwords as a way to review subjects I had studied to test how much I remembered.

### 2. What were your question sources? (for example, Qbank, Board Simulator, Exam Master.etc) Which were most helpful/representative?

Kaplan Q-Bank was mentioned most often as the best source:

- Qbank the most and found it to be the most representative of the questions on Step I. One of the great features is that you can set up tests/quizzes based on just one subject(i.e., biochemistry or physiology) or one system (i.e., neurology or GI) or a mixture of several subjects/systems.

- I used Qbank for doing focused tests after studying a specific area to see how well I had mastered the material.
- The board simulator question bank CD was useful to study from, but its question's were not representative of the test, a bit too detailed and not as clinical.
- Exam master was less helpful as it also had quite a few mistakes. (We no longer make this available because of the mistakes found in the program and low use by the students. Individuals may opt to purchase or get more details by going to [www.exammaster.com](http://www.exammaster.com))
- If you want a good feel for what the test will be like look at the CD the USMLE folks give us. I had two questions straight off that CD. (The NBME no longer makes this CD available, but sample questions and test may be found at [www.usmle.com](http://www.usmle.com))

### **3. Overall, do you think your time was better spent reading review books, or doing practice questions?**

Well, be sure to know First Aid well and I listed the review books I thought were important above. However, if it comes down to review books vs Q-bank, I think I retained more from Q-bank. I guess if you run out of time, do first aid and do all you can do in Q-bank in the areas you know you need the most work. I don't work for Kaplan either.

I think you need to do both. I got more out of reading review books and annotating First Aid with this information. Then I would get together with a study partner to review the info and quiz each other. This was especially helpful for the subjects you can memorize - biochemistry, microbiology and pharmacy.

I actually ended up not doing that many practice questions - maybe 200 of the 1000 on the Qbank. While I was studying, I felt like I should be doing more questions (especially since I paid for all the questions!), but I really felt I was getting more out of studying books and was just running out of time.

My best advice is to focus more time than you think you need to or want to on biochemistry and cell biology. I kept hearing that Step I was so clinically oriented now and that you need to focus more on a systems-based approach. However, when classmates who had already taken the exam started writing e-mails about how many biochem and cell biology questions were on the test I switched how/what I was studying and I think it helped quite a bit. (Basically I really worked on the memorization stuff which I was avoiding.)

It is good to do a mixture of both. I ended up doing 1500 Qbank questions (out of 2000 available), and did the practice questions at the end of the BRS Pathology and Physiology books. Overall I spent about 5 weeks studying for boards and studied on average, 6 hours a day and did about 1 hour per day of questions.

### **4. In a few sentences, could you share with us your best advice for preparation?**

Plan ahead. Pick your test date and then work out a schedule for all the books you want to get through, saving several days or even a week at the end for just questions, or for catch-up in case you fall behind. Make sure you know First-Aid very well.

Start early by paying attention in your classes, read the books through a few times, and then do all the questions you can get your hands on.

If you truly want to maximize your score then consider my advice. Obviously, you should keep your mind open to other suggestions as we all have different ways of learning. However, note that the most important things are not 1). to overextend yourself in studying from too many resources, 2). doing enough questions, and 3). giving yourself enough time to relax in your soon-to-be crazy life.

I believe a great score is a very important stepping stone into any competitive residency program - at least that's the gist I get from people who have been recently admitted to good residency programs. You may hear some people downplay the whole thing and telling you that, in the end, these

kinds of things don't really matter because you'll end up where you'll end up. I could not accept that. 'Tis a narrow-minded statement coming from someone who has "already been there, done that" and who has not realized that they worked hard and jumped through plenty of loops throughout their life to achieve their current success.

Thing is we don't know what our futures hold in store for us. My guess is that if you're reading this, then you're a proactive, take-life-by-the-reins kind of individual who likes to mold their future rather than leaving it up to chance to alone. The goal obviously is to maximize your options of applying to residency programs. Step 1 is to residency programs as MCAT is to medical school.

So, start studying now. It may seem like a long time away but the time you actually have to study for the boards seriously flies by when you're trying to study for classes at the same time. I studied a little during Christmas break and then by early April I was totally stressed because I had virtually pushed aside all of my USMLE study time during that time period.

Do not spread your time out too thinly. There are plenty of resources out there and you'll see or hear that classmates are using other resources. That's fine. Just pick and stick to your guns. Do not do what I did; used up a good month studying from far-out resources that I never had time to finish even once. This wasted month could have been used to finish studying from BRS physiology and the pharmcards.

Regarding actual exam day. Be CONFIDENT! I spent the last month or so infusing pure, unadulterated confidence in myself. Come test day, nothing could get me down. If I didn't know the answer, I made myself think that I knew the answer and chose by gut instinct.

### **Helpful Hint s for Exam Day**

**Food.** I brought along a couple large bottles of water and 1 large Gatorade for electrolytes and hydration. I munched on some bananas and pear (complex carbs to last for the day), 2 energy bars(ditto), and a couple of Snickers(quick brainfood metered out in small quantities throughout the day. Beware of eating too much simple sugar because you stand the risk of the "sugar blozz" That is, weakness, headache, confusion, etc). So, I stretched all of my drink and goodies throughout the entire test day in hope that I could simulate a slow-drip IV of glucose. I chose not to have a real bolus lunch because I figured it would weigh me down.

I suggest studying with friends for moral support and motivation. I think it is important to make a realistic plan that works for you and stick with it (and don't worry about what other people are doing! :). I used the timeline guide in the introduction to First Aid to decide how much time to spend studying to try to score in the 90th percentile and so I started studying in Jan/Feb. I did not take a prep course, so I would say I don't think you need one, but I think the people who took Kaplan found it good.

Try to get your hands on the Kaplan books and do a lot of questions. In

addition spend some time with fellow classmates quizzing each other. My friends taught me a lot and really helped me with the boards.

Work on developing endurance, do questions in sets of 50, so you can still think by the end of real exam. To me this was the hardest aspect of the test. And do not worry, it is not that bad.

Start early, don't cram (There is simply too much to master to try that approach).

Have something outside of studying that you like to do as a release. I studied for no more than 8hours a day, and took Sundays off. No one can study 24/7 and stay sane. You will start second guessing yourself, I promise and that isn't good.

Relax, you're going to do just fine.