



LSU HEALTH NEW ORLEANS
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE
OFFICE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS
USMLE Guidebook

Prepared by:
Dr. Jade J. O'Dell, LSU School of Medicine, Learning Specialist



Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Understanding the USMLE.....	4
Overview	4
What to know about Step Preparation	4
Where to start	4
How to study	4
What to study	5
When to study	5
When to take the exam	5
Step 1 Overview	6
Step 2 Overview	9
Breaks on Exam Day	12
Step Eligibility	13
Eligibility & How to Schedule Your Step Exam Date	13
Applying for Step	14
STEP ACCOMODATIONS.....	15
Getting Accommodations	15
Overview & Instructions	15
Step Preparation: Studying & Timing.....	16
Content Review	18
Using Question Banks (QBanks)	19
Practice Tests & Endurance	21
Developing a Study Schedule	23
Balancing time on topics.....	23
Balance & Your Wellness are Everything!	24
Asking for Help	26
References	27

Introduction

You have reached an important milestone in your medical education journey. Whether you are preparing for Step 1, Step 2 or Step 3, you have gotten far, and you should be proud of yourself. During this time (regardless of where you are in your medical education) comes anxiety, more pressure, self-doubt, fear, excitement, and the ability to see that there is an end. These emotions are normal. Do not try to avoid or ignore them – embrace them for what they are and know that with each level of test completion, they will slowly subside.

How to use this guidebook

The USMLE guidebook is a resource and meant to assist you as you prepare for Step exams. It includes links to various resources, including the USMLE website, that may be helpful. There are no right answers on how to prepare for Step. Every learner is different, and what may work for one person may not work for another. Consider what has worked for you in the past when you were preparing for SHELF exams. You should approach the guidebook as you would any other resource – find the parts that may be useful to you and try them out.

What to expect from the guidebook

- An overview of Step 1 and Step 2CK exams
- Guidance on question banks and approach to questions
- Guidance on developing study plans during dedicated
- Advice on when you “may be ready” to take your test
- Guidance on study schedules
- An understanding of finding balance between Step preparation and your well-being

What you should not expect from the guidebook

- A single action plan on how to pass Step
 - A direct answer as to when you will be ready to take Step
 - Secret strategies that will guarantee you pass Step
-

We don’t have all of the answers, and there is no magic to passing Step. Hard work, consistency, a solid plan and practice are what will get you to the finish line and help you pass Step. You got this!

Understanding the USMLE

Overview

The USMLE (United States Licensing Examination) is a **three-step test series** (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3) that medical students must pass to practice medicine in the United States. It evaluates medical knowledge, standards, and patient-centered skills, all of which you prepare for during your first four years of medical school. The USMLE program, which is sponsored by FSMB (the Federation of State Medical Boards) and NBME (National Board of Medical Examiners) supports medical licensing authorities and physicians by ensuring high quality assessments across the continuum of physicians' preparation for practice. [United States Medical Licensing Examination \(usmle.org\)](http://usmle.org)

What to know about Step Preparation

This is just the beginning. Everything you do in medical school is preparation for what you will be doing as a career. It is a marathon – you must pace yourself. At the same time, pacing can be challenging considering the volume of information you are being asked to learn and absorb each year. To be successful in medical school you must have a plan, and you must consistently stick to it. Preparing for USMLE Step exams is no different. There is a section in this guidebook dedicated to each Step exam. It is meant to serve as a reference.

Where to start

Consider the following when in your dedicated period of study time for Step:

How to study

- There is no magical “one way” to study and prepare for Step; what may work for one person may not work for another
- Connect with L3s & L4s, group leaders, tutors, deans, faculty, the learning specialist and seek advice, but remember, you know yourself better than others
- Trust that your current habits, resources and schedule may be the best approach to Step
- DO NOT compare yourself to others and determine your approach
- Your approach must be yours; customize it based on how you learn and absorb material best
- Develop a study plan/schedule
 - Use your first NBME Step practice test as your baseline to build a systems-based study plan
 - Start with weaker systems in UWorld Qbank and add new ones as your percent correct on practice question sets improves
- Know your strengths & weaknesses
 - Consider content areas that may have been problematic for you during years 1 & 2 or during rotations
 - Consider course performance in years 1 & 2
 - Make a 2-column list – strengths on one side, weaknesses on the other – this can help prioritize your content review when you start studying

- Timed, mixed-mode content is the goal when practicing/studying, but you also need a focused content review, guided by questions, practice tests and school performance. Practice questions will help you reinforce and recall information (detailed information about this will be discussed in the content review section of this guidebook)

What to study

- Don't overload yourself on resources – less is always more
- The more resources you have, the more overwhelmed you will become during the Step preparation process
- **Students have said that the first three (3) chapters of [Pathoma](#) are EXTREMELY helpful and important, as well as First Aid, Sketchy, Boards & Beyond**
- Do not purchase resources unless you know they will help – ask your peers what they have used and whether or not it is worth purchasing something you are considering
- If there is a resource that “guarantees a pass,” we would know about it – do not equate a more expensive resource with a higher or passing score

When to study

- Study resources in this guidebook can be used during your medical school academic studies and during dedicated.
- How, when and to the extent in which you use them will be based on your needs as a student
- With the support of the Office of Student Affairs, including the Learning Specialist, faculty, advisors, and peers you will figure out what works, what doesn't so that you are ready for your test day
- Know that everyone is here to help – breathe, focus on the end goal, and you will successfully get through it

When to take the exam

- Students struggle with the “when should I take Step” question
- You may never feel truly ready – and that's OK
- We recommend taking Step 1 prior to starting Bootcamp, which is usually at the end of June; it must be PASSED in order to be promoted to your senior year
 - **For Step 1**, NBME provides students a low pass range on NBME practice exams of 60-70 EPC, with a recommended scoring range of 68 EPC
 - Keep in mind, there is a 4-point margin of error on a score
- Step 2 should be taken no later than four (4) weeks prior to the residency application deadline in order for a score to be available in time
 - **For Step 2**, NBME provides students with a low pass range on NBME practice exams of 218 (score needed to pass Step 2CK)-233 EPC, with a recommended scoring range of 231-247 EPC
 - LSU SoM recommends you score a minimum of 231 on a practice test within one week of your exam day

Step 1 Overview

The **USMLE Step 1** ([Step 1 | USMLE](#)) is an essential part of the **USMLE**. It evaluates your understanding and application of fundamental scientific concepts relevant to medicine. Specifically, it emphasizes principles and mechanisms related to health, disease, and therapeutic modes. It covers information you have learned in years 1 and 2 of your medical education, the foundational knowledge. Generally, the Step 1 exam is taken between your 2nd and 3rd year of medical school, usually before you begin clinical rotations. Step 1 is pass/fail ([Examination Results and Scoring | USMLE](#))

Exam format

- Step 1 is a **one-day examination** divided into **seven 60-minute blocks**
- Each block contains single patient vignette-style questions followed by 4 or more answer choices
- Questions are based on your understanding and application of fundamental scientific concepts relevant to medicine (See content section below for more details on this)
- There is a maximum of 40 questions per block and a total of **up to 280 items** on the entire exam
- For every exam, an unidentified 80 questions are experimental in nature and do not count toward the overall outcome of the exam
- The test is administered in an **8-hour testing session**

Question Format ([Step 1 Test Question Formats](#))

- Single-item questions
 - Focus on a single patient
 - Presented in vignette format
 - Associated with ONE question & followed by 5 answer choices
 - Asks you to interpret graphic or pictorial materials
 - You must choose the best answer – others may be PARTIALLY correct (if one important detail is missing, it is not the correct answer), but there is ONE BEST answer

Sample Test Question ([Step 1 Sample Test Questions](#))

Example Question: Pharmacology: Foundational Science

The Step 1 examination continues to assess content related to the discipline of pharmacology. However, the primary focus of this content will be on the mechanisms of actions of drugs rather than on specific pharmacotherapy, drug-drug interactions, adverse effects, or contraindications of medications.

A 27-year-old woman comes to the office for counseling prior to conception. She states that a friend recently delivered a newborn with a neural tube defect and she wants to decrease her risk for having a child with this condition. She has no history of major medical illness and takes no medications. Physical examination shows no abnormalities. It is most appropriate to recommend that this patient begin supplementation with a vitamin that is a cofactor in which of the following processes?

- (A) Biosynthesis of nucleotides
- (B) Protein gamma glutamate carboxylation
- (C) Scavenging of free radicals
- (D) Transketolation
- (E) Triglyceride lipolysis

(Answer: A)

Content

- The exam covers basic science material organized along two dimensions: system and process
- Having a solid understanding of the percentage of each area on the exam can be helpful when mapping out your study plan and determining how many days you will spend on each area of content
- The test is weighted by content areas. The tables divide the Step 1 exam in three ways: percentages by system, physician tasks, and discipline [Step 1 Content Outline and Specifications | USMLE](#)

Table 2: Step 1 Physician Tasks/Competencies Specifications*

Competency	Range, %*
Medical Knowledge: Applying Foundational Science Concepts	60–70
Patient Care: Diagnosis	20–25
History/Physical Examination	
Diagnosis	
Communication and Interpersonal Skills	6–9
Practice-based Learning & Improvement	4–6

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

Table 1: Step 1 Test Content Specifications*

System**	Range, %
Human Development***	1–3
Blood & Lymphoreticular/Immune Systems	9–13
Behavioral Health & Nervous Systems/Special Senses	10–14
Musculoskeletal, Skin & Subcutaneous Tissue	8–12
Cardiovascular System	7–11
Respiratory & Renal/Urinary Systems	11–15
Gastrointestinal System	6–10
Reproductive & Endocrine Systems	12–16
Multisystem Processes & Disorders	8–12
Biostatistics & Epidemiology/Population Health	4–6
Social Sciences: Communication and Interpersonal Skills	6–9

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

Table 3: Step 1 Discipline Specifications*

Discipline	Range, %
Pathology	44–52
Physiology	25–35
Pharmacology	15–22
Biochemistry & Nutrition	14–24
Microbiology	10–15
Immunology	6–11
Gross Anatomy & Embryology	11–15
Histology & Cell Biology	8–13
Behavioral Sciences	8–13
Genetics	5–9

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

Step 2 Overview

The **USMLE Step 2 CK** ([Step 2 CK | USMLE](#)) assesses an examinee's ability to apply medical knowledge, skills, and understanding of clinical science essential for patient care under supervision. It emphasizes health promotion, disease prevention, and basic patient-centered skills. Step 2 covers information, knowledge and skills learned in year three of your medical education, the practical knowledge you gained during clinical rotations. Step 2 is scored, between 1-300; **the minimum passing score is 218** ([Examination Results and Scoring | USMLE](#)). Some

Exam Format

- Step 2 is a **one-day examination** divided into **eight 60-minute blocks**
- Each block contains vignette/chart-style questions, with a maximum of 40 questions per block and will not exceed a total of **318 items** on the entire exam
- You will have a minimum allotment of 45 minutes of break time
- There is a 15-minute optional tutorial that you can view before taking the test (Note: . The amount of time available for breaks may be increased by finishing a block of test items or the optional tutorial before the allotted time expire
- The test is administered in a **9-hour testing session**

Question Format ([Step 2 CK Test Question Formats | USMLE](#))

- Questions range from giving a diagnosis of patient, choosing the next best step in a patient's care, clinical intervention, health maintenance and disease prevention and professionalism
- Patient scenario formats
 - Patient scenarios for any Single Item or Sequential Item Set may be provided in either Vignette (paragraph) format, or in Chart/Tabular format
 - Chart/tabular formats – although they resemble patient charts, they are not intended to be an exact representation of a patient chart
 - These questions will contain relevant patient information in list form, organized in clearly marked sections for ease of review
 - Familiar medical abbreviations may be used within chart/tabular format questions
- Single-item questions
 - Focus on a single patient
 - Presented in vignette format
 - Associated with ONE question & followed by 4 answer choices
 - Asks you to interpret graphic or pictorial materials
 - You must choose the best answer – others may be PARTIALLY correct (if one important detail is missing, it is not the correct answer), but there is ONE BEST answer
- Sequential Item Sets
 - Single patient-centered vignette may be associated with 2-3 consecutive questions about the same patient/vignette
 - In these questions, you are being tested on a different aspect of the patient/patient care
 - Again, must choose the ONE BEST answer to each question

- Questions are designed to be answered in sequential order, and you will be asked to click “Proceed to Next Item” to view the next item in the set
- **NOTE: YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO GO BACK TO CHANGE A PREVIOUS ANSWER IN THE SEQUENCE ONCE YOU CLICK “PROCEED TO NEXT ITEM”**
- Abstract Format
 - Includes summary (similar to an abstract you would see in a medical journal) of an experiment/clinical investigation that a physician may face at one point or another
 - You must interpret the abstract to answer questions on things like decisions about care of an individual patient, biostatistics/epidemiology, pharmacology/therapeutics, use of diagnostic studies

Sample Test Question ([Step 2 CK Sample Test Questions | USMLE](#))

Patient Care: Diagnosis - Laboratory/Diagnostic Studies

A 17-year-old girl comes to the office for an examination prior to entering college. She reports that she feels well but is nervous about leaving home for the first time. She states that she has tried to diet to improve her appearance but that food restriction often “backfires” because she becomes hungry and then engages in episodes of binge eating. She reports a loss of control during these episodes, saying, “It’s like I stop thinking at all and before I know it, I have eaten two pizzas.” She induces vomiting several times during each binge and has developed a pattern of bingeing and purging every evening. She has no history of serious illness and takes no medications. She is 165 cm (5 ft 5 in) tall and weighs 57 kg (125 lb); BMI is 21 kg/m². Vital signs are within normal limits. Physical examination shows dry mucous membranes, erosion of enamel on the lingual surface of the front teeth, and hypertrophy of the parotid gland. Serum studies are most likely to show which of the following sets of findings in this patient?

Potassium	Bicarbonate
(A) Decreased	decreased
(B) Decreased	increased
(C) Increased	decreased
(D) Increased	increased
(E) Normal	decreased
(F) Normal	increased

(Answer: **B**)

Content

- The content is Step 2 focuses on principles of clinical sciences and basic patient-centered skills that provide the foundation for the safe and competent practice of medicine under supervision
- Specifically, Step 2 disciplines include medicine, surgery, pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and psychiatry
- Similar to Step 1, Step 2 content is also broken down in three ways: percentages by system, physician tasks, and discipline [Step 2 CK Content Outline & Specifications | USMLE](#)

Table 2: Step 2 CK Physician Tasks/Competencies Specifications*

Competency	Range, %
Medical Knowledge: Applying Foundational Science Concepts	0**
Patient Care: History and Physical Exam	0***
Patient Care: Laboratory/Diagnostic Studies	13–17
Patient Care: Diagnosis	16–20
Patient Care: Prognosis/Outcome	5–9
Patient Care: Health Maintenance/Disease Prevention	8–12
Patient Care: Pharmacotherapy	8–12
Patient Care: Clinical Interventions	6–10
Patient Care: Mixed Management	12–16
Practice-based Learning & Improvement	3–5
Professionalism	5–7
Systems-based Practice & Patient Safety	5–7

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

** Test items that assess patient care competencies may also assess knowledge of underlying foundational science concepts.

*** Test items that assess history and physical exam competencies are covered in Step 1 and Step 3 examinations.

Table 1: Step 2 CK System Specifications*

System	Range, %
Human Development**	2–4
Immune System	3–5
Blood & Lymphoreticular System	4–6
Behavioral Health	6–8
Nervous System & Special Senses	6–8
Musculoskeletal System/Skin & Subcutaneous Tissue	6–10
Cardiovascular System	8–10
Respiratory System	7–9
Gastrointestinal System	7–9
Renal & Urinary System & Male Reproductive	4–6
Pregnancy, Childbirth & the Puerperium	4–6
Female Reproductive System & Breast	4–6
Endocrine System	4–6
Multisystem Processes & Disorders	4–6
Biostatistics & Epidemiology/Population Health/Interpretation of Medical Literature	3–5
Social Sciences: Legal/Ethical Issues & Professionalism/Systems-based Practice & Patient Safety	10–15

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

The Human Development topic includes Normal Age-Related Findings and Care of the Well Patient

Table 3: Step 2 CK Discipline Specifications*

Competency	Range, %
Medicine	50–60
Surgery	25–30
Pediatrics	20–25
Obstetrics & Gynecology	10–20
Psychiatry	10–15

* Percentages are subject to change at any time.

Breaks on Exam Day

Both Step 1 and 2 are long exams. Have no fear, you do get a break on exam day.

- Step exams are all about endurance
- You'll have a minimum of **45 minutes of break time** during the exam
- The amount of break time can be increased should you complete a block of questions before your allotted time is up
- The test begins with an optional 15-minute tutorial, which is identical to the tutorial available online
 - You should watch [the tutorial video](#) online (maybe the day before the exam) so that you can skip it on test day and have the 15 minutes as extra break time
- Some test takers complete a couple of sections of the test then take a long break, but others prefer to take a 5-minute break at the end of each section
- The goal is to not get worn out by the hours long test
- You have about 90 seconds to answer each question – while you should not harp on the clock, you should be mindful of this

Step Eligibility

Eligibility & How to Schedule Your Step Exam Date

- Before taking Step 1, ensure you meet the eligibility requirements and understand policies related to time limits, retakes, and eligibility changes
- Once you apply and pay for your exam (You can do this on the NBME website), you will get a Certification of ID Form that will need to be verified and submitted by the School of Medicine Student Affairs office and sent to the NBME before you will be able to schedule the exam
- You have two options on how the Student Affairs office can submit these forms on your behalf
 - **Option 1: Email - Preferred**
 - The easiest option will be for you to email the form to Daryl Julien (djulie@lsuhsc.edu)
 - The form must have a clear picture attached in the appropriate space
 - The date and your signature at the bottom of the form must be handwritten (If they think that it looks like a font, they will not accept the form)
 - Check the top box at the bottom of the form giving the NBME authorization to accept your NBME online services and password
 - Once the form is complete, scan the form and email it to Daryl Julien (djulie@lsuhsc.edu)
 - You will NOT receive an email confirmation that the form was received (unless there is something wrong with it, in which case you will be notified)
 - Once the Office of Student Affairs receives the form, they will sign it and email it to the NBME; the NBME must process it
 - This can take a few days, but if you haven't heard anything from the NBME **within 2 weeks of sending it** to the Student Affairs office, please contact them
 - **Option 2: Hand-deliver/mail**
 - The second option will be for you to turn in the actual form to the Student Affairs office for them to mail to the NBME
 - Photo must be attached to the form with your original signature at the bottom
 - Forms can be dropped off to Daryl Julien (djulie@lsuhsc.edu) (Lions Building, Room 718)
 - You will see a place to leave the form in case Mr. Julien is out
 - The Student Affairs Office will fill out the top portion, have it signed, and mail it to the NBME via Fed Ex
 - As per the NBME, the processing time for paper forms may take several weeks due to mail delays and limited staffing; because of this, it is preferred that you follow Option one and email the form to Mr. Julien

- You will receive an email from the NBME once the Certification of ID form is processed; you can then schedule your exam date
- You will select a 3-month window for which you would like to schedule the test
- Once you are registered, you will receive a scheduling permit via email from NBME
- You will use the Prometric website to schedule your actual test date.
- You **MUST** bring the permit you receive to the Prometric testing site on the day of your exam – **you must present the permit along with an up-to-date, government-issued photo identification with your signature (i.e. current driver's license)**
- Your photo ID must exactly match the first and last name that appears on the scheduling permit

Applying for Step

- To apply for USMLE examinations, you must submit an application through the appropriate registration entity
- For Step 1 and 2, you will apply through the NBME website ([NBME Licensing Examination Services](#))
- There are fees ([Taking the USMLE® | NBME](#)) associated with Step – see the fee breakdown below:

2025 Fees

	Fees	Effective Dates for 2025 Fees
Step 1	\$680*	Three-Month Eligibility Periods starting November 1, 2024 – January 31, 2025 through
Step 2 CK	\$680*	October 1, 2025 – December 31, 2025
Step 1 & Step 2 CK	\$70	Eligibility period extension

Next year's application materials will be available by the second half of August.

* For information about taking Step 1 and Step 2 CK at international centers and regional surcharges email USMLEereg@nbme.org or call 215-590-9700.

Please note: If you submit a payment for registration and/or examinee records services that is uncollectible and returned to the NBME, you will be charged a \$25 fee. No further services will be provided until payment is received.

STEP ACCOMMODATIONS

Getting Accommodations

- If you have documented disabilities, you can request accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)
- **Applying for accommodations for the USMLE is an extensive process that should be started early** – about 12 months prior to their anticipated exam date (starting in May prior to an exam scheduled for the following May, for example)
- In general, you will be required to provide a personal statement, sufficient documentation with timelines, a letter of support (if applicable)
- Types of accommodations offered for the USMLE include, but are not limited to: additional time, additional break time, shortened test sections, multi-day testing, private testing environment, and assistive software or technology,
- Visit [Test Accommodations | USMLE](#) for more information on how to apply for accommodations for Step
- Reach out to Dr. Lazarus (claza1@lsuhsc.edu), Assistant Dean or Dr. O'Dell, Learning Specialist, (jodel1@lsuhsc.edu) for additional support

Overview & Instructions (as per [Test Accommodations | USMLE](#))

- Read the [Guidelines](#) carefully. Share them with the professional who will be helping you prepare your documentation.
- Read the instructions for completing the Request for Test Accommodations form.
- Complete and sign the appropriate [request form](#).
- If appropriate, have your medical school complete the Certification of Prior Test Accommodations form.
- Attach documentation of the disability and your need for accommodation (This is one of the most important steps to requesting accommodations for STEP. Be mindful of the guidelines as it relates to what you are asking for)
 - Compare your documentation with the information listed in these guidelines to ensure a complete submission.
 - Incomplete documentation will delay processing of your request.
- Send your request for test accommodations and supporting documentation to the address noted on the form. If you choose to e-mail your request:
 - E-mail attachments must be PDFs for documents. Photographs of Personal Items may be in a file format for digital photos such as JPGs/JPEGs.
 - Maximum allowed file size is 15 MB (per total message including pdf attachments, body text, and any overhead such as header size).
 - Please be aware of outgoing e-mail restrictions on your server.
- NBME Disability Services will acknowledge receipt of your request by e-mail within a few business days of receiving your request for test accommodations. If you do not receive an acknowledgement within that timeframe, please contact Disability Services at 215-590-9700.
- **NOTE:** If you are denied accommodations for Step 1, you can reapply for accommodations for Step 2

Step Preparation: Studying & Timing

Step 1 tests foundational knowledge, which you learn in years 1 and 2 of your medical education. Studying during years 1 and 2 goes hand in hand with Step 1 studying. What you are studying in years 1 and 2 will be reinforced in your studying for Step 1. Question banks (QBank), texts and other resources used in your courses will help you learn the material and make Step 1 prep more straightforward. Remember:

- Time spent on additional Step 1 studying during your courses should be determined by the amount of time left over once all course obligations are completed
 - We strongly encourage you to use QBank, **particularly UWorld** in conjunction with your coursework
 - Use UWorld in tutor mode for each block – not necessarily to test your knowledge or learn the material but to see how the material shows up on the Step exam
 - This will allow you to see the depth, breadth, and application of Step-style questions
 - **NOTE:** We don't expect you to know the answers to the questions, especially in the first semester of your 2nd year
 - Also, you should not attempt to complete a large number of questions
 - Familiarizing yourself with the question-style will be helpful once you start fully preparing for Step
- DO NOT allow early Step 1 preparation impede your ability to pass a course
- The LSU SoM Years 1 and 2 curriculum is meant to prepare you for Step 1
- You should constantly strengthen content knowledge, layer and mix subject content to make connections and see the big picture
- Constantly assess and reassess your strengths and weaknesses

Step 2CK tests practical knowledge. Step 2 preparation starts in Year 3 (*not after Year 3*), your clerkship year. To study for Step 2, consider this:

- Take clerkship year and shelf exam prep extremely seriously; this will help you excel on USMLE Step 2 CK
- View clerkship year as an opportunity to develop a solid clinical foundation
- Clerkship year gives you the chance to apply your medical knowledge to real, clinical scenarios; Step 2 CK is more clinically focused compared to Step 1
- Use UWorld's Step 2 CK question bank during clerkship year to prepare for shelf exams
 - You will get your first pass of the Qbank over one year and gives you early exposure to the question format on Step 2 CK
 - The goal is to get through UWorld QBank Step 2 CK twice before your exam date

Review, practice, and more practice!

- Review of content – deep review on weaker areas, continuous review of strong areas
- Improve your approach to questions
- Increase endurance for a long, strenuous exam
- Study plans should revolve around:
 - Content review

- Strategy of question approach (QBank)
- Endurance of Exam
- Consider this as you develop a study plan:
 - Am I strong in content, but have a weak approach to questions?
 - Do I get really tired after one block of questions?
 - Am I weak in all of the content and feel like I have to review everything?
- Everyone is different – wherever you are, you have support to help you
- We can help you develop a customized plan that will work with your strengths and sharpen your weaknesses
- Developing a strategic, realistic plan of studying will make it a lot less stressful

Where to start...practice and repetition are key – UWorld QBank

Analyzing your UWorld data is an excellent place to start to determine where you should home in on content and where to start. Really look at where you scored lowest in terms of content areas (subjects, systems and so on). Once you know where you are strong and where you are weak, you can then build your question banks for practice.

- Start with subject-based blocks (include your strongest ones and sprinkle a couple of weak ones – build on this for a few question blocks)
- Transition to random, mixed blocks once you feel comfortable with concepts in subject areas
- Standard, timed mode – NOT tutor mode
 - Goal is to mimic conditions of exam day
 - Helps you uncover weaknesses that you may not already know you have
- UWorld practice questions – First pass
 - Master high-yield information first
 - Identify strengths – keep practicing with this material so you don't lose it
 - Identify weaknesses & knowledge gaps
 - Take a few weeks to review weak areas/disciplines/systems, common errors
 - Look at the big picture
 - Create concept maps to make connections
- Second pass
 - Solidify high yield topics
 - Look closely at incorrect answers & determine why they are wrong
 - Are you second guessing?
 - Changing answers?
 - Stuck between 2 answers?
 - Just don't know the material?
 - Review explanations of answers – do you understand why your answer was wrong?

There is additional information on developing study schedules in the Developing a Study Schedule section of this guidebook. You can always reach out to Dr. Lazarus (claza1@lsuhsc.edu), Assistant Dean or Dr. O'Dell (jodel1@lsuhsc.edu), Learning Specialist for additional assistance with developing a realistic, strategic study schedule.

Content Review

Visit the USMLE Resource Guide on the School of Medicine [Student Affairs/Academic Support/Resources website](#) for a list of Step-specific resources available. Note that some of the resources come with a cost, so be mindful of that as you review the list.

Before you begin reviewing content for Step 1 studying, several factors should be considered:

- Your strongest and weakest content areas
 - Look at your practice question data (in UWorld) for assistance with this
 - Consider coursework or clinical rotations that was particularly challenging for you to grasp
 - Think about exam and Shelf performance
- How you will engage and actively review content; this should be an engaged, active process – not passive; passive = lack of retaining information
- Ways to engage and review content actively:
 - Watching videos and taking notes during the process
 - Working with anatomical models or printing off/drawing sketched images
 - Learning content then teaching it to someone else, like fellow classmates
 - Manipulating material through concept or mind mapping to better get the “big picture,” creating tables/charts, drawing pictures

The goal of active learning is knowledge retention; you not only read/review material, but you also find ways to conceptualize, interleave, and reinforce using **question banks**, flashcards and maybe pictures. The way you approach content review should be individualized. As we have said multiple times in this guidebook, everyone is different; we all learn differently, view things differently, absorb concepts and material differently – what may work for one person may not work for another.

Meet with Dr. Lazarus, Assistant Dean or Dr. O'Dell, the Learning Specialist if you feel you need extra guidance mapping out a plan for how and to what degree you review content. Remember, though, content review will be an essential part of your Step 1 and/or Step 2 dedicated review process.

Using Question Banks (QBanks)

Utilizing question banks (Qbanks) is one of the best ways to get practice with answering Step-style questions. Using Qbanks can help you with exam endurance, reinforce content, and improve test-taking overall. Practice questions can also help you determine why you may be making errors - do you get distracted, are you answering the question being asked, are you second guessing yourself, are you torn between 2 answers...knowing these things can help you tweak your question approach and strategically respond to questions.

QBanks are not just for Step preparation

QBanks can help you with your overall studying during your coursework and rotations, and we encourage you to use them throughout the curriculum. We highly recommend UWorld over other QBanks.

- During courses, QBanks can strengthen information you are learning for the first time
- During dedicated, QBanks can be used to:
 - Reinforce previously learned content through spaced repetition/recall and missed questions
 - Provide you with a clear understanding of Step-style questions
 - Learn the pattern and the reason why you are missing questions allowing you to improve your question approach
 - Mimic the exam environment and strengthen exam endurance

Effective test-taking when using QBanks

- Work on questions in blocks – over time, you will add more questions to your blocks and more blocks to each test setting
- Use tutor mode during coursework
- By dedicated, you should feel comfortable with content, so DO NOT use tutor mode during dedicated study time for Step – for Step prep, you should use timed, mixed blocks
- Don't overthink any one question; if you are unsure, pick an answer and move on or skip it and go back to it
 - A subsequent question may lead you to the answer for the question you may not know
- You may face questions that are easier for you toward the end of the block, so don't waste time pondering over any one question
- Remember, you have about 90 seconds to respond to each question based on the number of questions and the time allotted for each block

To make the most out of QBanks you should:

- Identify types of resources will be most beneficial to YOU and your learning style
- Integrate high-yield material you learn from questions and explanations and create a table of material that has to be further reviewed
- Be mindful of wrong answers and read the explanations – can you explain why your answer was wrong and why the correct answer is correct? This is an excellent learning opportunity

- Plan how much you will do in terms of questions each day according to your time – and be realistic. Don't rush or cram – this is just not an effective use of your time
- Constantly reflect on your strengths, weaknesses and knowledge gaps. When needed, use multiple sources of learning – pictures, tables, videos....

For a list of QBank resources, refer to the USMLE Resource Guide on the School of Medicine [Student Affairs/Academic Support/Resources](#) website.

Practice Tests & Endurance

It's no secret that taking practice tests is the best way to improve your endurance for an 8-hour exam. Practice tests can also provide you with a baseline as to where you are in terms of your knowledge, what has to be reinforced, and how much (if at all) you have to improve. LSU SoM provides you with 2 practice NBME test tokens at the end of your second year. We recommend you plan practice tests when it can be optimal for your own personal learning. Speak with the Assistant Dean (Dr. Cathy Lazarus) or the Learning Specialist (Dr. Jade J. O'Dell) to decide how many and when practice tests make the most sense for you. Remember, every student is different.

Practice tests - quantity and timing

While we encourage you to take at least two practice tests before exam day, you may want to take more than two depending on your progress during your study time. As stated earlier, it is important to get a baseline score when you initially start preparing for Step; we want to see that score increase as you study. Using practice tests strategically can benefit you.

- Practice tests should be completed at the standard pace (unless you get accommodations for additional time); this allows you to practice getting through the exam in the allotted time.
- Use your practice tests to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses and as a guide on how to direct (or redirect) your studying and schedule during the remainder of your study period.
- Reviewing material repeatedly through questions also helps you integrate information and retain it.

About practice test scores....a low score may lead to stress and anxiety – have no fear. It is OK. The score is not the only measure of your knowledge. A high score may contribute to a false sense of security. Bottom line - do not get fixated on your score! Practice tests are extremely useful – they help with endurance, time management skills, and getting comfortable with the testing environment.

Practice test environment

When taking a practice test, the goal is to simulate, as much as possible, the test site/environment. You may want to consider taking a practice test at the Prometric test site. Details are at [Pro Scheduler](#). Within your 90-day eligibility period, Prometric offers a practice session with a brief tutorial section and three, one-hour blocks of approximately 40 multiple-choice test items each. Upon completion, a printed percent correct score is provided. The opportunity to become familiar with the testing site may help decrease anxiety on the test day. Contact your local Prometric Testing Center for costs to schedule a practice test. You also have the option to use the library, an empty classroom or other quiet places on campus. You will receive information on using the Testing Center for practice tests prior to the beginning of dedicated time.

It is important you simulate your testing environment when taking practice tests. The best place to take a practice test is a quiet place with no interruptions or excess noise, likely outside of your home. This might be the library, a reserved classroom, or other reserved, quiet space with “testing in progress” posted to the door.

Practice test resources

- **Multiple Question Blocks.** Using QBank blocks one after the other with breaks simulating the testing environment (Usually included in whatever QBank you choose).
- **UWorld.** Four blocks of 40 questions practice exam. (**1 test with 90-day access [\$439], 2 tests with 180-day access [\$479], and 3 tests with 360-day access [\$559]**).
Note: Access = access to UWorld's entire QBank in addition to the practice tests
- **Kaplan.** Offers a **FREE** three-hour diagnostic exam
- **Comprehensive Basic Science Self-Assessment Exam (CBSSA) (\$60)**
- **USMLE Practice Examination (\$75)**
- NBME Free 120 (**Free**)

Developing a Study Schedule

Schedules of any kind go hand in hand with time management. They are very personal in nature. They are individualized based on one's needs, obligations, and other things. A solid, realistic schedule will help you stay focused and on track. It's important to acknowledge that managing your time and following a schedule can be difficult if you are not used to it. You have to be open, flexible, be willing to make adjustments throughout the process, and not beat yourself up when you go off schedule.

Your dedicated study schedule should include several flex-days for “catch-up” or more time on a particular topic. You should allow more time for review toward the end of dedicated study time—reviewing material helps with retention and more rapid recall during the exam itself. You should never feel like you are cramming. **BAD IDEA!**

It is easy to get stressed and ignore the importance of food, sleep, exercise, family, and friends if you get behind schedule. A daily routine helps to maintain mental health and decrease burnout. If you need help with developing a study schedule or working on time management, visit Dr. O'Dell, the Learning Specialist. She can help!

We can support you in outlining your Step 1 schedule for dedicated as well as throughout the curriculum.

Balancing time on topics

- You should gauge where you will start with studying based on your UWorld data or your practice exam
- While you should focus on weaker topics and/or those more heavily emphasized on the exam, you should not stop reviewing material in which you are stronger – you don't want to lose it
- To guide how you will divide the topics on the exam, you should refer to the “content outline” on the Step 1 (or Step 2CK) - you can refer to the Step 1 or Step 2 Overview sections of this guidebook or the [USMLE Website](#) for more guidance on this
 - Look at the percentages of questions for each area in systems, physician tasks, and disciplines – the higher the percentage, the more questions in that area on the exam
- Refer to the “How to Study” section in the Introduction portion of this guidebook for further information on how to balance your strengths and weaknesses in your topics
- This is not an easy process; reach out to Dr. Lazarus (claza1@lsuhsc.edu) or Dr. O'Dell (jodel1@lsuhsc.edu) for help with the best approach for you to manage your time and develop a balanced study plan.

Balance & Your Wellness are Everything!

Your overall health and well-being **must not be forgotten** during Step preparation time. This is why being strategic with your time and schedule is so important. Keep the following in mind as you move through the Step prep process.

- **Control what you can.** You have control of yourself and your decisions. Be smart with your time, where and on what you spend it, and always focus on yourself and your needs.
- **Focus on your energy and your optimal time of day.** When developing your study schedule, you should schedule the most challenging part of your studying when you are most alert – morning, midday, evening...the goal is to get the best use out of your time
- **Environment matters when studying.** Find a good place (or places) to study. Consider the least distracting and absence of anxiety-triggers. Home, the library on campus or in your neighborhood, a coffee shop...where is the most effective place for you to truly focus?
- **Silence is golden.** Turn off your notifications – on your phone and computer. Turning off all phone and computer notifications will help you concentrate better. Map out in your schedule when you will take a break to check your phone and email. Make it part of your daily schedule.
- **Don't isolate!** You need human connection; dedicated study time can be very isolating. Engage with others in some way throughout the entire dedicated study time. Maybe you can study with a peer (if it is not distracting). Add time spent away from studying to your study schedule.
- **Study buddies.** Some students benefit from a study buddy. If this works for you, make a plan to meet with a classmate to review a topic, ask each other questions, teach a topic to one another - find a white board and be productive with your time
- **Breaks and time off.** A study schedule that is too rigid can be more harmful than helpful. To be effective, study schedules should have study breaks and at least one full day off a week (e.g., one full day, or two mornings, or two afternoons...). You should **schedule a 5-10 minute break** at least every 45 minutes as this **simulates the testing environment**. Get fresh air if you are able. When taking a break, walk away from your study space & relax – no flash cards or podcasts on the spin bike. Respect your limits and stop studying for a few minutes (or for your day off or morning off). You should schedule time each day to exercise, meditate, refuel with nutritious food and get some sun – **never sacrifice your health**.
- **Sleep matters.** Get on a sleep schedule that will model the wake time on test day. Practice so you're ready for exam day.
- **Just DON'T compare yourself to others.** Just don't do it! Someone will be studying more than you (or less than you). Someone will be using a resource that you may not be using. It's

OK to listen to the advice of others, but you know yourself best and what works for you. Be confident in your own strategies and do what works best for you.

- **“I need more time!”** Avoid the urge to push back the test date because you think you need more time to study or because you don’t feel “ready.” There comes a point where additional study time is counterproductive. Although the thought of an additional week of study time may be tempting, be confident in your ability and in the effectiveness of your study schedule. Changing the test date can negatively impact your confidence and contribute to anxiety. **You will never feel totally prepared;** most students “peak” (in terms of knowledge and preparedness) at 5-6 weeks of dedicated study time. If you truly are not prepared, based on practice test scores, or unexpected circumstances, reach out to Dr. Lazarus (claza1@lsuhsc.edu) to discuss next steps and make a plan.
- **Getting a passing practice test score is important.** If you are not yet passing your practice exams at least in the “low pass range” (on NBME between 60%-70%), we will recommend you delay your exam until you reach a passing score. We want you to have at least 2 consecutive passing scores before we give you the green light to take Step. The Assistant Dean and Learning Specialist will work with you to think through strengths, weaknesses, strategies, and opportunities to help boost both your confidence and performance on test day. However, we cannot “tell” you not to take the exam on your scheduled test date. You ultimately have to determine if you are willing to push the date back.
- **Burnout is real.** It is easy to ignore the signs of burnout, which include (but are not limited to) fatigue, decreased motivation, headaches, changes in diet or sleep patterns, and depression, stress, and loss of interest. Not sure if your burnt-out? Take this [Burnout Quiz](#). It may shed light on why your state of mind. If you are experiencing burnout, please talk to someone. Resources are in the next section of this guidebook.

Asking for Help

Sometimes, you may need an extra set of ears, eyes or just a helping hand when preparing for Step 1, Step 2 or both exams. Things that many students need guidance on include:

- Developing a study schedule/time management
- Finding balance between studying/preparing for Step and well-being
- Study strategies
- Test-taking strategies
- Understanding practice test data
- Analysis of practice test errors
- Test anxiety
- Applying for Step accommodations

Reach out to your **LSU School of Medicine Resources**. We are your village—you are far from alone. We are here to help and support you!

Dr. Taniya De Silva, Associate Dean, Student Affairs and Records

Office Phone: (504) 568- 2545 | Email: tdesil@lsuhsc.edu

Dr. Cathy Lazarus, Assistant Dean, Student Affairs and Records

Office: (504) 568-4874 | Email: claza1@lsuhsc.edu

Dr. Hamilton Farris, Assistant Dean, Student Affairs and Records

Office: (504) 568-4874 | Email: hfarri@lsuhsc.edu

Dr. Jade J. O'Dell, Learning Specialist

Office: (504) 568-2546 | Email: jodel1@lsuhsc.edu

[Book time to meet with me](#) (schedule an appointment with Dr. O'Dell by following the link)

CAP (Campus Assistance Program) Human Development Center, Suite 233

(504) 568-8888 | cap@lsuhsc.edu

If you feel like you need mental health assistance, please visit the CAP office.

Have faith in yourself. You can do this!

References

Emory University School of Medicine Step 1 Guide. [step-1-guide \(emory.edu\)](https://step-1-guide.emory.edu/).

Hinson, L. (2022). Burnout Test: Am I Burned Out? [https://psychcentral.com/quizzes/burnout quiz](https://psychcentral.com/quizzes/burnout-quiz)

National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME). [Nbme.org](https://nbme.org/).

Preminger, J. (2024). USMLE Step 1 & Step 2 Average Scores by Specialty In 2024.

United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE). [Usmle.org](https://usmle.org/).

What is Burnout? <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/signs-of-burnout>