

Planning a Study Schedule from USMLE*Help*.com

Obviously, not just the time you spend on your studies, but the quality of the study time is of essence here. The higher the quality, the better the results you will most likely see. So if you are organized enough and willing, spend as much time as you feel necessary, and take a look at our suggestions to create your own study schedule for your individualized preparation time.

Keep in mind that this time of studying is really just a comprehensive review of material that you **already know**. You will not learn many things for the first time, though you will notice that as you review information, you will be able to see the connections of various subjects! At first it may seem as though you need to go through everything again and this may very well be true, but the rate at which you relearn things is quite rapid, so don't panic.

This is a general guideline for any USMLE exam you plan to take, above all, Steps 1, 2 CK, and 3. Step 2 CS is somewhat different, but these general guidelines will help you determine what requirements you have for those as well.

As you plan your study time, it is important for you to establish your goals. How much time you need for a certain subject (and actually the whole exam) is totally up to you. Do not forget that learning and studying is individual, and it also depends on how long ago you have studied this information.

Before we begin to delve into the scheduling part of the exam, let us talk about a few general, yet vital principles:

- **Make your schedule and stick to it.** Many have benefited from approaching studying for the boards as a job. Get 2 alarm clocks. One to start and finish, and one for breaks. They should be two different rings and easy to set. Set one for the amount of time you want to spend per day and the other is for your breaks. And stick to it – no matter what.
- This brings us to breaks. **It is vital that you include breaks in your schedule.** This can be a grueling period of time for you, so make sure you schedule breaks during the day. We recommend 10 minutes per hour so that your studying time is reduced to 50 minute intervals. You might not think you are ready for a break after the first 50 minutes, but study-marathons are not very effective. Your motivation level and overall efficiency will also be enhanced by adequate rest periods.
- Don't think that what works for one person will work for you. Some say First Aid is the series of books to use, some say Crush the Boards, while others say USMLE*Help* Books are the way to go. Spend time researching what is good for you, and stick with at the most 2 books. Of course, we are very partial to which books you should choose!
- If you used a review book during class, use it as well now. There are so many books from which to choose, so if you have one with which you are familiar, use that one.
- **Review larger subjects while repeating blocks of questions of previous subjects.** Study the tough subjects intensely in the beginning, then come back to them for questions (and discussions). You will be amazed how much you pick up that second time through the blocks of questions.
- Use practice tests to your advantage. USMLEWorld is one good source of practice tests. Schedule them into your (at least) last hour of studying every day. As the test-date approaches, try to do several back-to-back one hour blocks to get yourself ready for the exam.
- **Don't completely blow off any subject.** It is silly to miss some easy points in something like Biostatistics when the information can be picked up in just a little bit of time. If you say, "I won't study this part, or I won't study that part," you must realize that it does add up. Before you know it, 15% of the information that you could possibly have easily learned (behavioral science, certain biochemical pathways, biostatistics, to name a few) could mean getting the score you want or not.

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- Especially during those last couple days, be sure to come back to *USMLEHelp* books. They are the high-yield, just the facts book you need to review. Quick reviews, important information, and you can take them anywhere. Diaper bag, purse, back pocket – there’s no reason that they’re too heavy!

“Plan of Attack” – General Guidelines

It's Saturday, 11 AM, and you just awoke from a party last night to celebrate whatever. Why did you celebrate? It doesn't matter, treat thyself, doctor, and take an aspirin and.....relax. **Yes, relax.** Should you honestly start studying for your exams now? (Would you honestly want to treat a patient on a day like this?) Take a weekend off. You deserve the break. See you Monday.

If you are like the most medical students/graduates preparing, you probably won't be able to totally not take your break. So, what we suggest to do is to make a couple of lists:

1. Your favorite subjects
2. Your hardest subjects
3. Your best subjects (list 1 and 3 might be the same)
4. Your worst subjects (list 2 and 4 might be the same)
5. Your worst distractions during the day/evening.

Think long and hard about these lists, and jot down the reasons you think these are so hard for you. Find your weaknesses, but also find your strengths. Think about what gets you “out of the loop” during your study sessions. Is it the phone? The cat? The dog? The baby? The messy apartment or house? Be brutally honest with yourself and **write them down.**

Monday morning: Turn off the cell phone, the Ipad, the TV – whatever will bother you. You can't shut off the baby or the family pet off, but if you can, get someone to watch over them while you head to the library and take a practice exam to see where you stand. **This is vital.** No babies or messy houses will be at the testing center. We recommend Kaplan's exams or USMLEWorld's exams. We recommend you do 1 block of a mixture of subjects. About 180 questions should suffice.

Don't correct the exam right away (if you can). Stand up, get something to drink out of the fridge, clean the messy house that you can't stand, look out the window, call your mom and tell her that you love her, do *something* other than checking your score.

Don't freak out completely if you do poorly (almost everyone does), but pay special attention and note areas of obvious weakness. Get your lists out that you have prepared, and compare notes. Since everyone is different, we suggest you start from worst subject to best – with some exceptions.

- List the results of all subjects from worst to best.
- List your favorite to most hated subjects.
- Combine and mesh the two lists, alternating from “I hate this like the plague” to “This isn't hard at all”.
- Look at what is ranked high and what is ranked somewhat lower in the USMLE Step that you are taking
- Review your distractions list, and complete, check off, plan for those to leave.
 - Your spouse is demanding? Find a solution. The possibilities are endless, and whatever your problem, fix it.
 - Is your house a mess? Clean it up – like you've never cleaned before. It's never going to look as good until after the exam.
 - Is the baby at home? We know that this is a tough one for many, but perhaps your child could go to a friend or family member for the time you are studying. Look into daycare. Look into any possible option that you can.
 - Is “life” getting in the way? Here we suggest to remove yourself from some of your responsibilities - go to a university library (public or other libraries often have reading groups, children visits, or other loud people) or other **outside**, quiet place to study. Turn off the cell

- phone, turn off the ringer, turn off the TV. Soap operas aren't that great to begin with – honestly – and you know that deep in your heart too.
- Were there lawnmowers or renovations going on while taking the exam?
 - Write down to get some earplugs. Whatever else the distractions, get rid of them, no matter how.
 - Don't make your schedule just yet.
 - Take another practice exam after you have corrected the previous distractions.
 - Re-evaluate your lists accordingly. Make sure you leave some time in between the actual test and the correction of it. Hey, you're going to have at least 6 weeks. Get used to it!
 - Rejoice in the fact that you might have done better than the last time in some subjects, but don't despair if you didn't. It takes a while to get into the "studying/testing" mode.
 - The hardest part: Deciding on what time-frame you should choose for each subject.
 - We don't know your responsibilities at home or at work, so we cannot help you with your time-frame.
 - Don't freak out that some people "say" they need only 4 weeks to study for a certain exam. Don't yawn and think, "what idiots" for people who need 6 months. Everyone is an individual and at a different level. Some are long out of med school, some are still in the midst of it. We can only suggest a minimum of 4 weeks and a maximum of 6 months for any given exam.
 - Don't think you can *efficiently* have a 12 hour study day. It's not going to happen, unless you're robo-medi-cop, but otherwise, your setting yourself up for failure. Plan 8 hours or less (depending on your circumstances), 10 minute breaks for every hour. That will be over a 6 hour (don't forget ½ hour for lunch) work day, study day, and success day!
 - Our personal recommendation is the time you will spend at the actual exam: 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. You will train yourself to be highly concentrated in this timeframe.
 - If you cannot do this due to home or job-related issues, do not feel bad. We know that everyone has different responsibilities, and therefore we only state what we have tested.
 - Ask yourself the following questions: Did you find an annoying college student was giggling the whole time you were taking your exam? Find a computer/cubicle that separates you from most people.
 - Take a look at your results from both exams. Did you see major improvement? Well, that is great! Pat yourself on the back, but take an average of both exams and re-evaluate your lists.
 - When do I schedule my exam, you ask. That is also up to you, and dependent on your lists. What we suggest, but out of experience, is to **set a definite date**, and stick to it. You will know if 6 weeks is unreasonable, but you might know that 6 months will be murder. Review your lists, review your schedule, and take a deep breath and go on the USMLE website. You will know.
 - After every study goal you reach, take up to 2 (*but no more*) practice. Don't do 600 questions of a certain subject just because you think you're much smarter now. Stick to 2 blocks, because you have a lot more material to cover. Keep a log of all of your percentages for each block.
 - After you have finished 3 subjects, increase the blocks to 3-4 per day, including subjects that you have completed. First complete blocks of questions that you have previously answered. Compare how you did to the previous time. If they are the same or even worse, spend time on the discussions.
 - General notes on "How should I be doing?" We have done some research and, with USMLEWorld.com, you should be at least getting 60% to be able to pass comfortably. Kaplan's material is a bit higher. 65% correct is what we have read over and over on boards, heard from medical students and graduates. We understand that some of you are great test takers, but others may have the "false-positive" effect. That is why we suggest you limit your "block-intake" after every goal and to repeat previous blocks before you take a look at other questions.
 - Keep plugging along until you have reached the half-way mark. No matter if you are in the middle of a subject or not, take a 2 day break. Yes! 2 days!!! You deserve it! You have accomplished a lot!
 - Laugh. You have 10 minutes in between every single hour. Use it. Laugh! No matter what makes you laugh – find it. Is it a comedy sketch on your Ipod? Your baby's laugh? The comic-strip in the daily paper? Is it talking (ahem, dirty?) to a spouse or significant other? Find whatever makes you laugh, and fire it up in your break. **Do not think of medicine at this time.** Mental health is so important in this time – don't forget it!

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- On this note. Don't get burned out, but don't make your life too easy. When you are finished with your studies for the day, **do something that is enjoyable for you, and you alone.** You have accomplished a lot! If it's going shopping, taking a bath, dancing around the house like you're in the movie, "Flashdance" or if it's working out at the gym. Whatever it is, reward yourself – no matter how your block of questions went. It might be hard at first if the day was tough or you didn't do as well as you expected, but take at least ½ an hour time and spend it on yourself. You will find that you will look forward to this after every day.

A Final Word

There is no magic recipe for success on the USMLE Steps. Successful preparation boils down to a few, yet important, things.

1. Work hard!

Students report that a lot of material tested on the USMLE exams was learned in class, not crammed at the end. But, if you are out of med school for a while, don't worry. Stay mentally and physically healthy, stick to your plan, and you will be fine.

2. Use board review books.

For most subjects, this means faithfully reviewing and previewing.

3. Be strategic in your preparation.

For the intense USMLE study period, select standard board review materials that are well-regarded (such as USMLEHelp books or others) & make a *reasonable* schedule based on your goals, and **stick to it.**

4. Don't let the "heebie-jeebies" get the best of you.

If you get very nervous and scared just thinking about the exam, take a look at our positive verbalizations to reinforce that you are smart, calm, and very cool. Of course, everyone has a bad day. Accept it, and move on. Don't let yesterday influence what you do today. Better yet, don't let the past hour influence the following one. Use our USMLE-mantras to get you through the study-day. They are located on our "free downloads" page on USMLEHelp.com.

5. Play hard!

You deserve it. Don't forget to relax and forget about medicine. It is your right, and it is best for your mental health. A good balance of hard work and relaxation is the key to success. You and the people around you will thank you.