

USMLE Step 1

NBME 16	200	7 months out
UWorld 1 st Pass	89%	Tutor – untimed
3 weeks dedicated		
NBME 13	252	21 days out
NBME 15	255	18 days out
NBME 17	252	16 days out
UWSA 1	277	14 days out
NBME 18	261	11 days out
UWSA 2	264	9 days out
NBME 19	257	7 days out
Free 120	88%	3 days out
USMLE STEP 1	261	

This document recounts my experience in preparing for the step 1 exam. I will mainly be covering:

- Where I was at when I first started preparing for the exam
- Which resources I used (and maybe how I used them)
- How I managed my dedicated period
- My impressions of the exam day
- Problems I encountered with the ECFMG

Baseline

Up until I sat the baseline test, my medical school curriculum had covered all major organ systems and small amounts of microbiology, biochemistry, immunology and pharmacology. I did the NBME 16 as a baseline quite early on. I didn't get much information from doing that test as pretty much all topics were below average (shouldn't have done it). This was before I started doing UWorld. I used FA, Pathoma, Sketchy occasionally in the previous years alongside my university teachings. In terms of where I sat in my cohort – I was probably top 5-10%, but as an IMG, I am not sure if this has any correlation to final scores.

How do you get a good baseline? I think putting consistent work up till the exam is the key (I know, I know, doesn't really help, but that's honestly that's what I think contributed the most). It gave me a relatively solid foundation to build my step 1 exam prep on.

Resources

Most useful

First Aid 2017

The bible. Everything is high yield. I just kept going through it (memorizing) and whenever there was a topic I encountered on UWorld or anywhere else, I would look at the relevant pages. I tried annotating on it, but stopped as I didn't find it particularly helpful. After a while things stuck in my mind. I had at least 95% of it memorized. Didn't spend much time as I would have liked on the pharmacology section though. Altogether I may have gone through the rest of the book maybe 3 times – But I didn't keep track.

Don't forget the rapid review section at the back of the book. It was very useful particularly towards the end of my dedicated (especially the formulas).

Pathoma

This was good. I watched the videos only once through and annotated on a hard copy. Took a similar approach to what I did for FA2017.

UWorld

10/10 – must use. I did a block per day for 2 months. Took 3-4 hrs per day. I made anki cards for questions I got wrong and I read through each of the explanations and if there was information that I didn't know or seemed high yield, I also made an anki card for it.

My approach to UWorld also involved looking at a question and understanding all the options. For example, out of options A-E, if A was the answer, why are options B to E wrong and asking myself, how would the question be written/asked if other options were the answer.

Sketchy Pharm & Micro

Sketchy was fantastic. Covered most things. There was some information that wasn't included, but UWorld usually covered them. For microbiology, make sure you look at images of what the bugs look like under microscopy/staining etc. Again, some bugs were not covered and UWorld does a good job covering them. Sketchy pharm was a bit more cluttered than micro, so I had to review pharmacology a few more times, but overall still very helpful.

Anki

I used the brosencephalon deck as much as possible. It was particularly useful for the biochemistry content. I also used it for UWorld incorrects and I found a sketchy pharm & micro deck online and reviewed them quite often. Leading up to the exam, I also found a FA2017 rapid review deck and went through that a couple of times.

UWSA & NBME practice tests

I used these tests to identify which areas needed improvement. The exam can be similar to these in style and content. From what I have done, averaging the tests seem to have approximated my final score quite well → so my advice would be to do them.

Dr Najeeb

I used these lectures throughout my first few years of medical school. They were long videos, but very helpful as often he explained concepts behind certain points listed in other sources. I wrote notes down as I watched the lectures. I didn't use any of the videos for this year's prep.

Less useful

Boards & Beyond

I only used this resource a little throughout dedicated. I used it mainly for biochemistry. It was good, but I haven't used it enough to recommend it.

USMLE Rx

I used this mainly for the weaknesses that I identified in my practice tests (psych, behavioural science & biostats). Didn't get too much additional information from this → UWorld definitely was a lot better.

Kaplan lecture notes

I had access to this, but I didn't use it much at all. There was too much text – I consulted this when there were things that the review material didn't explain.

First Aid Basic science – Organ systems

This book was quite wordy, but I did refer to it a few times. It's overall a good book to supplement learning. There are also nuggets of information in the sidebars that I wished I had gone through.

USMLE Step 2 CK

I sat the exam towards the end of the year. My medical school curriculum for this year included a good amount of step 2 CK material (for which I used Toronto notes & First Aid step 2 CK). There were a few questions that I would not have gotten if I didn't do those blocks.

Dedicated

I had 3 weeks dedicated. I sat the NBME 13 the day after my university semester exams. I also tried to rush through all my incorrects from UWorld as well as the cards that I made in anki. I spent a couple of hours every day reviewing FA (at this point I was basically reciting the book ~10 pages/hour) and once I had most of that done, I got bored and went through the Pathoma book. I also spent a couple of hours a day on my weaknesses identified in my practice tests. I did blocks of UWorld again (timed & random) when I had free time, but only got through about 10 blocks or so (at this point I had 0-2 Qs incorrect per block) by the end of dedicated. I ended the day off with some boards & beyond videos.

I typically woke at 6 ish, started studying from about 7am to 12am with ~30mins for lunch and dinner each and spared 1-1.5 hours for gym most days. Before my dedicated period, I would typically spend 4-5 hours every day (including UWorld – which by itself, took 3 hours or so) studying for the step 1 exam on top of my university commitments.

My dedicated period was shorter than most people's (I think), so I did all my practice tests quite close together. As such, there were days that mainly consisted of doing a test and reviewing it. I also noticed that I started off with a 252 and by the end of the 3 weeks, I was at 257. I am not sure if this was a small/acceptable/significant increase, but I was aiming for 260+.

A few days before my exam (around when I did the free 120 Qs), I honestly felt a bit over it. I didn't know what else I could do and the 88% spooked me a bit. I ended up just mainly reviewing FA again and did more of the questions on my weak areas.

The exam

I would describe the exam to be moderately difficult with a mixture of NBME & UWorld style questions. There was a mixture of easy, difficult and 'wtf' questions. I took each block, then had ~5 min (forgot exactly how much time – but I skipped the tutorial at the beginning and only checked whether my headphones were working) for a toilet break & snacks (brought a slab of hazelnut chocolate – finished half of it at the end of the day) – I took a bit more time for lunch. Wearing pants with no pockets is highly recommended – there were a few people getting into the test room and they took a bit of time and after metal detecting them, they had to wand me and that sometimes wasted a couple of minutes of my break time. Throughout the test day, I felt minimally stressed, even excited at times. However, there were a few moments where I panicked when I got to a question I wasn't sure of. (also at the beginning when I thought "shit, this isn't UWorld anymore, it's the real test").

Also know your buzzwords – there were quite a few in my exam and they made it easier. Biostats in my exam as far as I can remember barely contained any of the conventional questions like calculating sensitivity/specificity etc. It was more focused on graphical analysis & population health graphs (which I didn't really review that much)

For each block of 40 questions, here is how I split my time:

- 40 minutes → I ran through the questions, if I saw a question I wasn't sure of/didn't understand/had no idea, I marked it and moved on
- 15 minutes → focused on the questions I marked
- 5 minutes → reviewed all the questions to make sure I selected the choice I intended to

This was the rough plan I stuck to (time management generally is not a problem for me). Admittedly by the end of the day (block 5-7) I got tired and things took a little more time than in the earlier blocks, so I didn't really have much time to do the 5-minute review. Also for some blocks, I marked more questions, so I also didn't have the 5-minutes left. I marked anywhere from ~7 -15 questions (don't remember exactly, but it wasn't a lot). I left the exam exhausted and felt indifferent about the exam. I knew I missed questions, mainly stuff that was never covered (or I don't remember ever seeing), but overall it felt okay.

Changes

Overall, I am happy with my result, but there are a few things that I would have done differently:

- Use Sketchy Path (came out when I was already done with most studying)
 - Even though I did well on the pathology discipline – I think it would have helped
- Spend a bit more time on the pharmacology section in FA
- Construct my anki cards better
 - I should have worded my cards better → I had trouble going through my incorrect UWorld anki cards because of the way I worded the questions – sometimes I didn't know what I was asking → which made the whole experience not as effective as it could have been.
- Spend more time on the brosencephalon deck
 - Should have started earlier and got more of it done
- Spend more time memorizing Pathoma & review the videos (if I had time)
 - A lot overlapped with FA but there were sections which I should have read more
- Create a 'remind sheet'
 - Information that I kept forgetting – I would write down on a sheet of paper
 - Be careful not to put too much on it (i.e. be selective) or it will become a wall of text no different to a review book.

ECFMG

I encountered some problems during my wait for my score report. I had to wait 2 months for my score report. I later learned that this was because my medical student status had to be reverified and until then, my score report was withheld. ECFMG had sent my university a verification form at the beginning of the exam period, but for some reason (university forgot about it or there was a delay in mailing), my university took a month and a half to send the verification, so I didn't receive my results till 2 months after my exam. ECFMG also informed me that if you apply more than 4 months before the 1st day of your allocated exam period, they will send another medical student verification form to your university (so expect delays).

Final words

Ultimately, preparation for this exam is not an easy feat. It's a marathon and persistence is key. I think setting a goal is very helpful and working consistently throughout the exam prep period (as well as previous years) would be beneficial. There will be times where you can't even think straight during your studies. I experienced those moments and that's okay. Take a break. Also take some time to reflect. It's important to stop every now and then and evaluate your progress and ask yourself – Are you on track? If not, why not? What are some of your current weaknesses? What can I do to improve those areas? I personally think the most crucial point, in any sort of exam prep or learning is to understand why something is the answer. Often there are concepts tested and once you grasp those concepts, solving problems become easier. So, ask more questions and keep trying to look for an explanation. Furthermore, this exam is largely a game of pattern recognition. You see a few features mentioned in your question stem and that should immediately prompt you to think of certain diseases/drug side effects/microbes etc. I am not sure how to perfect this skill, but perhaps going through review material multiple times will help.

Anyways, best of luck to anyone preparing for the step 1!