

November 28, 2016

Advice for UCD Students Planning on Studying for the USMLE Step 1 Exam

Before I begin my little blurb on how I approached the USMLE Step 1, I would like to say that this exam is absolutely doable. Don't let anyone freak you out about it. However, I do believe that there is a direct correlation with how much time you put in (and how many questions you do) and your score. This may seem obvious, but I believe that it is a fair correlation and you should use this to your advantage. I wrote the USMLE this past summer and to add some credibility to what I'm saying, I scored a 260+. Here are some tips and the strategy I used for the USMLE.

I spent a total of 6 months where I studied with classes (average of 15 hours/ week) and then had 42 days off of dedicated time (10-12 hours/ day). I started studying in January, so you certainly have plenty of time to start. I do recommend you spend your extremely long December/January break at least reviewing subjects you had already covered at UCD in the past 3 semesters. February is a very light month in GEM 2, so I would aim to get some solid studying done during this month. March becomes crazy with your week of exams and OSCEs, so understandably you should focus on those. April is catch up month for Neurology, so again it will be a fairly heavy month for UCD work. During Babyrez, you are free to choose between studying and attending hospital. Just keep in mind that Babyrez is a very unique time. It is a luxury to be only 2 or 3 students per team and to spend 2 weeks with the same team on surgery. You will not get this luxury in GEM 3 (you will be 5 students per team, and you only spend 1 week on each surgery rotation), so keep this in mind if you are sacrificing your Babyrez time to study. Sorry but I am unable to comment on the undergraduate schedule.

Students at UCD did extremely well this past USMLE cycle, with everyone having a slightly different strategy. But there was one commonality among people who scored 250+. The majority of their time was spent doing questions. I would say I spent approximately 80% of my time doing questions. What people did with the remaining 20% really varied. In total I completed 8000 practice questions and I believe this is why I did as well as I did on the exam. The wisdom of the internet says that you should use the UFAP + Sketchy Micro/Pharm (+ NBME practice exams) method as a basis for doing well on the USMLE. I more or less followed this with some additions that I will mention. UFAP stands for U World, First Aid and Pathoma. I'll explain these resources and how I used them in the coming paragraphs.

First Aid is the bible for the USMLE, as you might already know, with all the topics covered on the exam. It is very difficult to study from First Aid

efficiently, and I definitely do not suggest you sit down and read the thing. It is too disjointed in its point form version. I used it more as a reference text. Please do not spend too much time reading First Aid. There are many people who spent days upon days reading this book and I believe that is not the most effective way to study. But I do believe you should cover everything in this text at least once before your exam. If you do practice questions, you will come to know everything in this book anyways.

U World is a question bank (www.uworld.com), one of three main question banks, comprising 2500 questions that you must do in its entirety before the exam. The key to doing these questions is not in getting the correct answers (I had about 75% correct when I finished), the whole point of these questions is to read every single word of every single answer explanation (even the ones you get correct). The questions themselves are actually much harder than on the actual exam, so don't be discouraged at the beginning if you are only getting 40% correct. Everyone starts with a low correct percentage.

Some people do the questions and annotate the answer explanations into First Aid directly. If this works for you, do it, but it can take ages. What I did was I just took notes in a notebook on all the answer explanations, in no particular order, and I wrote the unique question number beside the explanation. In total I took 600 pages of notes for U World alone. U World allows you to search for specific questions, so when I reviewed my notes and wanted extra information, I could simply search for the question number. This essentially allowed me to go through U World a second time quickly in the week before the exam. Now I would save U World as your final question bank to complete (there are 2 others that I will discuss below). I did U World during my dedicated study time and it took me exactly 35 days to complete. So please leave yourself enough time to complete this question bank.

Now everyone under estimates how long questions take to complete. One block on U World (40 questions total), took me on average 3-4 hours to review. Most people who scored highly in our class took this long and I certainly think you are not maximizing the question explanations if you are doing these questions much faster. I feel strongly that questions should be taken very seriously. Please do not do questions on the bus or on your phone. Sit down and spend the time doing questions. On the bus, you can listen to Goljan pathology audio or you can do Anki questions if that is your strategy.

I used 2 other Q-banks prior to U World. USMLE-Rx is a really great Q-bank to begin with (www.usmle-rx.com). It is a bit too basic for the USMLE, however, it is an amazing way to help you memorize First Aid. If you type in "USMLE-RX discount code" into google, you can usually find a 12-month subscription to USMLE-RX for 149-169\$ on one of the USMLE discussion forums

online. This is the Q-bank I would begin with.

The second Q-bank I used was Kaplan (<https://www.kaptest.com/medical-prep/usmle/usmle-prep-course/step-1-qbank>). In my opinion, Kaplan is too overwhelming. It tests you on basic minutia, which will not come up on the actual exam. It does have decent explanations with decent figures. If by May you haven't finished USMLE-RX, I would not start Kaplan. I would go straight to U World. However, if you have time, the more questions you do the better. But ultimately, you need to finish U World and you should leave yourself enough time to do so.

Pathoma is a set of pathology videos, and I'm almost certain most of you are already using these videos. I believe that Pathoma is the best pathology resource out there, and ultimately step 1 is a pathology exam. Pathoma really breaks down pathology into its simplest terms. The USMLE is not an exam testing you on random recall, it is an exam testing you on true mechanisms and understanding. The whole Pathoma series is 35 hours, however, the doctor who recorded it speaks really slowly. So by the end I was watching these videos on 2.9x speed. In total, I watched this whole series 6 times. I recommend you work on getting through Pathoma at the very least once during your December/January break.

Sketchy Microbiology and Pharmacology are sets of videos using animations in order to recall random details related to both topics. You should definitely be using these for your micro and pharm classes for UCD anyways. Ultimately, Microbiology and Pharmacology are probably the most random recall heavy topics of the USMLE. You may find these videos ridiculous at first, but stick with them and you'll learn to love them. In total, I went through Sketchy Micro 3 times in total, and Sketchy Pharm 2 times in total.

As I mentioned before, there are a few strategies to approaching this exam. A lot of people used Anki flash cards. I tried these briefly and just didn't like them. If I had more patience and time, I probably would have considered annotating all the question banks into Anki and reviewing them. But I don't really have any experience with Anki, so I can't comment on the feasibility of this strategy.

Now in terms of testing yourself to see where you stand after all of your studying there are a total of 6 official USMLE practice exams (called NBME exams). Each one cost 40\$ + 10\$ (to see a score analysis). I recommend you pay the 50\$. These exams give you a score when you complete them which seems to very well approximate your actual final score. The exams are 200 questions in total (not the full length 280 questions), and take approximately 4 hours and 40 minutes to complete. I finished 5 of the 6 of them and I recommend

you aim to finish as many of them as possible. There is also a “free 120” practice exam (<http://orientation.nbme.org/Launch/USMLE/STPF1>) available online through the USMLE people. I found these questions are the best approximate of the real exam. If you do this practice exam, it does not give you a score only a percentage correct. Also keep in mind that you have to write out your answers on a sheet of paper, because the online program does not correct the exam for you. Finally, when you buy U World you have an option to buy 2 practice exams. These exams are also worth doing, however, the predicted score they give you is less reliable. They do give you nice answer explanations though, which the NBME practice exams do not. I would not start doing practice exams until probably the last 8 weeks before your exam. This is how I went about it, but others may differ on this opinion.

Finally, I was very meticulous in keeping a spreadsheet and writing in what I did for the USMLE each day. For example, I would write: 40 USMLE-RX questions (3 hours). This came in very handy when I was trying to figure out a reasonable plan for my final dedicated 42-day study period. I knew that getting through 5000 questions in the final 42 days was not possible at the pace I was going. This kept me on track and definitely kept me from pushing my exam. Above all, really try to write your exam during the summer. GEM 3 is extremely heavy and balancing classes, with elective applications, with step 1 is next to impossible. This exam is absolutely doable. It is really based on how much effort you put in, so if the US is your main goal for residency, putting in the hours will pay off. Good luck!