

Test Taking Strategies

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Strategies for Preparing for USMLE Board Exams

Plan to read at least three hours per week.

Have a regular study schedule.

Develop a study plan. (*Nancy Barrett available for consultation*).

Connect reading schedule to rotations, if possible.

Read about your own patients.

Keep a log of what you accomplish during a given period of time. It may be more or less than you think. If less, look for potential barriers that keep you from accomplishing your goals.

Form informal study/quiz groups with other residents.

Attend noon conferences.

Attend regular study sessions where available.

Focus reading on areas

- ✓ Where you have scored low on previous exams,
- ✓ That are not as interesting to you or
- ✓ Where you have not had a recent rotation

Practice board-type questions

Strategies During the Test:

First scan all the questions.

Do the matching (or multiple-choice) type Qs first.

Skip questions you have no idea how to answer and come back later if you have time.

When making a guess, mark it with pencil so you can go back to it if you have time.

For very long MCQ questions, read the last line and lab results first and then scan the answers.

Select one possible best answer and move on.

If questions contain pictures or diagrams, look at those first for clues.

Be aware of time. Try to look at your watch at least every 10 min.

To complete as many questions as possible, spend only 1 to 1 ½ minutes per item.

Remember, there is no penalty for guessing!

On-Line Study Resources:

Board Review Strategies: http://www.acponline.org/counseling/br_strat.htm

Test-Taking Strategies: <http://www.acponline.org/journals/news/may99/boards.htm>

<http://www.acponline.org/journals/news/june00/strategies.htm>

Dealing with Test Anxiety

*Adapted from: University of Illinois, Chicago, Academic Center for Excellence:
<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ace/strategies.shtml>*

BEFORE THE EXAM:

1. **Put things in perspective.** Remind yourself that your entire future doesn't depend on this exam. There will be other exams and other courses.
2. **Over-study for the exam.** This will increase your confidence. Also, if you know the material to the point of facility, you will be better able to answer test questions despite your test anxiety.
3. **Remind yourself of past successes.** Think of a tough course in which you struggled but eventually succeeded. Tell yourself that if you did well on that past exam, you can do well on the upcoming exam.
4. **Don't give a test the power to define you.** An exam won't tell you whether you're brilliant or stupid. Your performance on an exam mostly depends on how well you studied for the test, the quality of your prior education, and the test-taking strategies you use.
5. **Visualize completing the test successfully despite your anxiety.** Play the entire "tape" in your mind -- from the moment you wake up on the day of the exam to the moment you finish the exam.
6. **Use the word "quiz" rather than "exam" or "test"** when you think about the upcoming evaluation.
7. **Practice anxiety control strategies.** As you study, deliberately induce anxiety by saying to yourself the negative thoughts you typically have during an exam (i.e. "I'm going to fail.") Now, practice the Anxiety Control Procedure (described below). Remind yourself that you will probably experience some anxiety during the test, but the anxiety won't hamper your performance because you've practiced controlling the anxiety.

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DURING THE EXAM

1. **Try to avoid talking with other test-takers right before the exam.** Their anxieties may rub off on you.
2. **Choose a seat in a place with few distractions** (probably near the front).
3. **Remind yourself of how hard you studied**, how well you did on another exam, and how you've practiced anxiety control.
4. **If you begin to feel overly anxious, use the ANXIETY CONTROL PROCEDURE:**
 - Turn the test paper over and close your eyes.
 - Breathe in slowly to the count of seven and exhale to the count of seven.
 - Continue this slow breathing until you begin to feel more relaxed.
 - Open your eyes, turn the test paper right side up, and give yourself a positive self-talk (i.e. *"You're sure to do well. You studied hard and remember, you got an A on that final in physics."*) This whole procedure should take only about a minute to do. It's well worth the time!
5. **If you become overly anxious about time:** Check the time periodically (say after you've finished a third of the test), but avoid checking too frequently, as this will only distract you and make you more anxious. Remind yourself that it's better to miss a few points by not quite finishing the test than to lose your concentration and thus miss many points.
6. **Approach your studying seriously, but think of the test as a game.** Your goal is to collect as many points as you can in the time available. Don't worry about a particular question. If you're unsure of the answer, guess and move on. Remind yourself that you can miss a few questions and still do well.