

Instructions for Working Internal Medicine Board-Style Questions

Please note these instructions are intended for working questions during rotations or electives and prior to an Intensive Study Period (ISP). This process can help you develop an effective approach to utilizing practice questions as a study tool that increases understanding and long-term retention of important concepts.

1. Identify a quality question bank.

- CMU Health offers free access to **USMLE Easy** and **Board Vitals** through the CMU Health Medical Library Services. *CMU Health Residents recommend the following: MedStudy and MKSAP questions.*

2. Select questions that align with your current rotation or conference/didactic topics.

- Do questions one at a time, in tutor mode, utilizing a systems approach focused on one topic at a time. Focus on quality over quantity – don't rush.
- Alternatively, select questions that align with topic areas that tend to be your weaker subject areas and are heavier weighted on your upcoming exam. Visit the [ABIM Examination Blueprint](#) to review the medical content and content distribution.

3. Experiment with the **EASE Approach: Examine, Associate, Summarize, and Ensure**¹.

A. **EXAMINE:** Read the lead-in (question) first.

- Consider what type of task you are being asked to address. See example ABIM question tasks below:
 - Diagnostic inference/differential diagnosis
 - Clinical feature
 - Diagnostic testing
 - Natural history/epidemiology
 - Treatment
 - Management decision
 - Pathophysiology/basic science
 - Interpretation of literature/statistical methods
- Reflect on your strengths or weaknesses related to this topic.
- Glance at the answer options and/or the first sentence of the question.
- Take a moment to think about the more significant concepts associated with this type of question and/or the topic.
- Decide how you will approach this question.
- Consider what is important to pay attention to as you read the body of the question.

B. **ASSOCIATE:** Read the body of the question.

- Read the body of the question carefully to identify signs and symptoms of a disease process or a topic.
- Identify important clues related to the patient history and physical exam. Consider risk factors.
- Translate the clinical clues into appropriate medical terminology. (This is the process of code switching.)
- Look for clinical facts and build a differential diagnosis sentence by sentence or segment by segment.
- Consider how each sentence or segment contributes to the clinical scenario presented.
- As you begin to build your differential diagnosis, anticipate the correct answer.
- Ask yourself if possible answer options are consistent with what is being presented, sentence by sentence. Then, consider why or why not. Watch for distracting information.
- Begin to rule in and rule out answer options.

¹ Adapted from The Step 1 Method webinars (various, 2017) and "A Step by Step Guide to Success on the USMLE Step 1 Exam" by Dan Gebremedhin (2012).

- Remember to consider what is most likely or common.
- Look for abnormal and unique symptoms.
- Utilize a systematic approach to all questions and only make calculations or review panels, studies, lab findings, etc. after carefully reviewing patient history and physical exam findings.

C. SUMMARIZE: Restate the question using information from your one-liner or short statement.

- Summarize the key clues or significant details and create a short, one-sentence statement, or a “one-liner.”
- Double-check your one-liner by fact checking the key signs and symptoms (be careful about jumping to a conclusion).
- Use this “one-liner” to confirm your answer to the question.
- Review each answer option. Pick the response option you believe is right or the best answer. Make sure the answer fits the clinical scenario and answers the question asked. Then, “rule-out” the other responses in a similar way. Distractors will be partially correct, but NOT the best answer.

D. ENSURE: Confirm you have read the question correctly and select the best answer.

- Select the best answer option and move on.
- If you’re unfamiliar with response options, make a note to spend time studying these terms, topics, or concepts later.

4. Read the answer explanations, annotate your central text, and create study tools.

- Consider the ABIM tasks for this topic and make sure you could address different types of tasks
- Draw out or talk out all of the ABIM tasks related to this topic (presentation, natural history, clinical features, mechanism of action, pathogenesis, course, complications, diagnostic testing, differential diagnosis, risk assessment, treatment/care, management, etc.).
- Note important details and annotate in your central text or a study notebook.
- Ask, “What would I have to change in the body of the question to make each distractor the best or right answer?” to dig deeper into specific question content.
- Create an algorithm to help you organize concepts and recognize patterns (a table, checklist, decision tree, flow chart, etc.)
- Don’t worry about speed prior to your intensive or dedicated study period. Focus on learning material and retaining information. If you find an area of weakness, it is okay to spend more time.
- Be mindful of topics that you have never heard of and are not in your central text. Remember, the ABIM is interested in material a general internist or subspecialist in practice must recall. Less frequently used information may be important if it deals with potentially life- or function-threatening conditions or important management decisions.
- Be systematic and patient. You will get more efficient. In the meantime, you are reinforcing a strategy, which will become a habit.
- Aim to complete a set amount of questions each night or on a regular basis.
- After completing a series of questions, identify your strengths and weaknesses. Prioritize weaker areas to spend more time on learning or relearning.

5. Incorporate time to revisit prior and all exam topics.

- Create question blocks targeted on specific topic areas.
- Every two or three weeks, set aside a question review day to complete 3 – 4 blocks of randomized sets of questions focused on the topics you have recently studied (or are studying in your conference sessions).
- About once a month, complete a 4 – 5 question block set of ALL ABIM topics, timed, randomized to simulate the exam experience and to revisit all content. (Note: This randomized review can increase as you get closer to your actual exam date.)
- Take or simulate a practice test several months prior to your exam to inform your progress.

Additional Study Tips

- Plan regular study time to review your notes, annotations, flashcards, etc.
- If you find yourself distracted or confused by unnecessary details in a qbank question, make a note to revisit the concept/topic. Revisit a primary text or alternative resource and work to understand all of the related ABIM tasks.
- Practice “free association.” As you study concepts watch for themes or similarities. Compare and contrast similar concepts or topics. This will help to build differential diagnoses.

Resources

Gebremedhin, D. (2012). *A step by step guide to success on the USMLE Step 1 exam*. Gebremedhin.

(n.d.) *Question-writing guidelines*. Retrieved from

<http://www.acvim.org/Portals/0/PDF/ACVIM%20Dip%20Resources/ABIM%20Question%20Writing%20Guidelines.pdf>