

# *UCSF School of Medicine*

## *USMLE Step Exam Guide*

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### **References:**

Jain, N. & Bisagno, J. (April, 2016). Supporting Students Accommodation Requests on High Stakes Exams. *Third Annual Disability in Health Science and Medicine Symposium*. San Francisco, CA. Used with permission from Neera Jain to inform Appendix C.

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USMLE Test Accommodations Website: <http://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/>

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**USMLE STEP EXAMS  
Directions for Students Requesting Accommodations**

The National Board of Medical Examiners (NBME) USMLE examinations (Step 1, 2 CK/CS, and Step 3) will be a key part of your medical school experience. As a student with a disability seeking accommodations, you will need to prepare in advance and understand the NBME requirements.

Requests for accommodations on these exams are made directly to the NBME. The NBME sets their own requirements for requesting accommodations, including specifications for disability documentation, personal statements, and other required information for your application. The request process is outlined on the NBME’s website [<http://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/>].

The NBME suggests that students submit their request early and anticipate a response no earlier than 60 days after submission. In our experience, the timeline for responses is closer to **90 plus days**, especially during peak testing times. In addition to the 90 plus days wait-time, the process of preparing an application can take 3-6 months. Therefore we recommend you factor in time to develop a personal statement, collect documentation, and allow an additional 90 plus days to file appeals, should your initial request be rejected.

**Given the length of the total process, UCSF recommends students applying for accommodations on the USMLE Step 1 begin the process in August prior to their anticipated April exam window.**

**Suggested timeline: See detailed timeline in Appendix A**

July-August	Meet with Dr. Lisa Meeks from Medical Student Disability Services (MSDS) to develop checklist for needed items, Craft Draft Personal Statement
August-September	Edit and Revise Personal Statement, Collect Necessary Documents. Apply for NBME ID.
October	Apply for Accommodations Directly to NBME Our office will put packet together to send.
October –January	Await response
January	Craft Appeal to Decision, if Needed
January-March	Await response
March	Reserve Testing Time/Location
April	Take Step 1

## Table of Contents

<b>Documentation Needs for the NBME</b> .....	2
UCSF Letter of Support.....	2
Supporting Your History of Disability .....	3
<b>Types of Accommodations</b> .....	4
<b>Additional or extended rest breaks:</b> .....	4
From the NBME: <i>BREAK TIME</i> .....	4
<b>Multi-day testing:</b> .....	5
<b>Testing in a Private Environment</b> .....	5
<b>Assistive software or technology:</b> .....	5
<b>For students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHOH):</b> .....	6
From the NBME: DHOH .....	6
<b>Personal item exemptions:</b> .....	6
<b>Newly Diagnosed or No History of Accommodations</b> .....	7
<b>Application</b> .....	7
<b>Scheduling the Exam</b> .....	7
<b>Testing Centers and Accommodated Testing</b> .....	7
<b>The Personal Statement</b> .....	7
From the USMLE: The Personal Statement.....	7
<b>Points of consideration for personal statements</b> .....	8
<b>Appendix A: Detailed Timeline for UCSF Students:</b> .....	9
<b>Appendix B: General Checklist and Timeline for Accommodation Requests on the NBME Exams..</b>	10
<b>Appendix C: Topic Prompts for Personal Statements</b> .....	11
<b>Acknowledgements and References:</b> .....	12

## Documentation Needs for the NBME

### UCSF Letter of Support

UCSF Medical Student Disability Services (MSDS) will support *all* students through the process of requesting accommodations on the NBME. We will provide you with a letter of support to include with your application, and complete the required form documenting use of accommodations while in medical school. We also offer guidance on the strength of your application based on your documentation, your history of using accommodations, and how recently you were diagnosed.

Crafting the disability services letter of support will take approximately 2-3 weeks. These letters are very detailed and include qualitative information about your disability and how it impacts you in the medical school setting. This letter includes a statement about your approved accommodations at UCSF and our rationale for approving the accommodations. It also includes information about any changes to your accommodations and any extenuating disability related issues that support your application for accommodations on the exam. Our goal for the letter is to capture information about your need for accommodations and how your disability impacts you in the academic setting.

## Supporting Your History of Disability

To the extent information is available, you should provide additional information to strengthen your request for accommodations. Historical evidence of accommodation, and need for accommodation, can bolster your chance of receiving accommodations from NBME. If you have been diagnosed later in life, you should give examples of how your undiagnosed disability affected your early life and education.

Historical disability evaluations, letters from doctors, letters from previous institutions where you received accommodations, letters or proof of approval on previous graduate entrance exams (e.g. MCAT, GRE), IEPs, report cards with comments referring to behavioral patterns, inattentiveness, or need for extra supports, can help to substantiate a history of receiving formal or informal accommodations.

Likewise, a letter from a professor, advisor or an employer providing further evidence of the impact of your disability on learning or performance while in school or on the job (e.g. a letter from a former supervisor describing performance issues or additional support required on the job as a result of disability related difficulties) can help to substantiate the impact of a disability, even if you were diagnosed later in life. If accommodations or adjustments were needed in a workplace for a documented disability, this also helps to support your request, as it shows that your disability impacts you outside of a classroom or educational environment.

Transcripts from elementary school, high school, and/or college should be provided if they **clearly show** the impact of your disability on your grades. For example, if you have a history of dropping or withdrawing from coursework to maintain your GPA, this might serve as evidence that when given a reduced course load you excelled.

Letters from professors, teachers, guidance counselors or other people who can describe your previous academic performance may be helpful **if** they can show how your work was impacted by disability, or how the use of accommodations and strategies improved your performance. If you were diagnosed later in life, if there was a professor or support person who suggested that an initial evaluation might be necessary, or who first connected you with disability related supports, a letter from that person might be helpful to contextualize your circumstances.

You might mistakenly assume that because you received accommodations on previous exams, you are assured accommodations for the NBME. This is not a certainty. MSDS will work with you to identify particular gaps in your application and to ensure that you request only those accommodations that directly address the barriers that result from your disability (see: *Types of Accommodations*). Alternatively, you might assume that because you have never received accommodations before, you will not receive accommodations now, leading to a decision not to apply. We caution students against making this assumption and instead encourage you to reach out to MSDS so that we can discuss your case.

For those who have had accommodations in the past, while it is certainly possible that you will receive the same accommodations for the NBME exams, the NBME may decide that you are not eligible for adjustments based on their *specific criteria* (<http://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/guidelines.html>) for eligibility. You may also find that the accommodations offered or approved are different from the ones you used in previous academic settings.

The key to receiving accommodations on the USMLE Step 1, 2 or 3 exam is to build an “air tight” argument reflecting that:

- 1) You are a student with a disability
- 2) Your disability acts as a barrier to the exam

### 3) Accommodations will level the playing field, making the exam accessible

You can find the guidelines for Documentation from the USMLE at:  
<http://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/guidelines.html>

#### Types of Accommodations

##### Commonly requested accommodations and points of consideration for each:

##### Extended time (standard time +25%, 50%, 75%, 100%):

Extended time accommodations are more likely to be approved if the request is based on concrete evidence from your documentation that support the disability-related need for the accommodation (e.g. very low academic fluency scores), and you have a history of receiving such accommodation. Your request should be based on the amount of time you have received historically, as this is what you know works for you. For example, you should not request 100% extended time if you have never been approved for 100% extended time before. You should provide a clear rationale for all requests in your application.

You should consider the specific structure of the exam and the impact of extended time on taking the exam. For example, approval for 100% extended time (double time) may necessitate that the exam be administered over two days given the length of the exam with standard time. Depending on your disability, taking the exam over two days may be a barrier to your performance; for example, this might increase anxiety in a student with obsessive-compulsive disorder.

##### Additional or extended rest breaks:

For the USMLE, all test takers are given 45 minutes of break time for authorized breaks during the exam; however, you may request to have additional rest breaks added to the exam day as an accommodation.

Instead of requesting an accommodation for multiple brief rest breaks, you would request to have additional time added onto a standard break provided to all students taking the exam.

##### From the NBME: *BREAK TIME*<sup>1</sup>

*Step 1, Step 2 CK, and Step 3 Your test session is scheduled for a fixed amount of time and the computer keeps track of the time allocated for each block and for breaks. At the start of the testing session, you have a total of 45 minutes of break time for authorized breaks and for computer transitions between blocks. Authorized breaks include any time you spend between test blocks, whether you remain at your seat or you leave the testing room. If you complete the tutorial or other testing blocks early, the remaining time will be added to your total break time. Once you begin a testing block, no authorized breaks are provided during the block. ....If you take too much break time and exceed the allocated or accumulated break time, the excess will be deducted from your total testing time. Use the time summary feature (explained in the tutorial on test day) to keep track of your time. Step 2 CS Your Step 2 CS administration will include 12 patient encounters. The examination session lasts approximately eight hours. Examinees get a minimum of 45 minutes in break time, which includes a 30-minute lunch period.*

If you have ADHD or another disability that benefits from the opportunity to take a brief break to clear your head, this accommodation may be worth considering. On the USMLE exams, it may be more appropriate than extended time as it gives you the opportunity to *refocus* your thoughts versus extended time, which can lead to exhausting testing conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed instructions on breaks can be found at: <http://www.usmle.org/pdfs/bulletin/2016bulletin.pdf>

If you have health concerns that need monitoring, you may also wish to request additional breaks to check blood sugar levels, grab something to eat, or to take medications. (See also: personal item exemptions).

You should request the specific amount of time needed for each break (e.g. a 10-minute break at the end of the each exam section) as well as the frequency of breaks (e.g. after each section of exam or every hour of exam time).

If this accommodation is approved, the NBME will tell you how the approved breaks will be structured so you are prepared on the day of the exam for what will be provided.

### **Multi-day testing:**

This accommodation may be of significant benefit to someone whose cognition, physical ability and energy level, or eyesight fatigues over a period of intense focus. Supporting documentation should specify the amount of time a test taker can work on an exam per day.

### **Testing in a Private Environment**

If you experience high levels of anxiety, distractibility, inattention, panic attacks, or similar disability related concerns you may wish to request this accommodation. If you require a private space for talking out loud or briefly stepping away from the computer to assist with comprehension, focus, or managing anxiety you may find that a private environment is necessary to allow you to use these key techniques to maximize your performance and to manage your symptoms without disturbing others.

It is important to decide whether breaks might be helpful in order to use calming techniques in addition to, or in lieu of, this accommodation.

***If this accommodation is approved, it is important to remember that testing centers have limited individual rooms.*** For that reason, you will need to secure a space well in advance, or may have to travel some distance to find a center with such provisions. You should investigate options for testing centers at the beginning of the scheduling process so you are fully aware of your options.

### **Assistive software or technology:**

You should consider requesting only the software or assistive technology that is absolutely necessary to facilitate access to the specific exam format. Not all the assistive technology you use in a normal course or in doing your course readings will prove useful on a specific exam.

Your request should document your history of using such software, and specify why that specific software is necessary for this exam, both due to the format of the exam (e.g. the format of the exam involves reading patient case examples, and thus includes a significant amounts of reading) and due to the nature of your disability (e.g., you experience a significant amount of eye fatigue, and thus need large print and reverse contrast screen colors; you are very familiar with ZoomText software after 5 years of daily use, and should have access to the same software during the exam due to familiarity with keyboard shortcuts, and settings).

Your medical provider or evaluator should be sure to note their recommendation for the specific device, software or technology needed to facilitate equal access to the exam materials in the documentation.

## For students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHOH):

### From the NBME: DHOH

*The USMLE computer-based examinations (Step 1, Step 2 Clinical Knowledge, and Step 3) each contain a small number of multi-media items, which may have an audio component.*

*The Step 2 Clinical Skills (CS) examination involves the use of simulated patients to test medical students and graduates on their ability to gather information from patients, perform physical examinations, and communicate their findings to patients and colleagues. The Step 2 CS examination may involve one or more patient encounters where the examinee is asked to communicate with the patient by telephone.*

*If you have a hearing impairment/hearing loss that is covered under the ADA and that would impair your ability to access the examination content under standard conditions, please follow these Guidelines to request test accommodations. Comprehensive documentation of hearing impairments must include a report of a clinical evaluation by a qualified professional (otolaryngologist and/or audiologist) and a copy of your most recent audiogram or audiometric report.*

*The report of evaluation should include:*

- Actual scores and results from all tests, procedures, measurements, and scales administered for the evaluation.*
- Information about whether the hearing loss is static or changing. Hearing loss of a changing nature may need to be documented more frequently (e.g., within the past 6 months).*
- Specific information concerning the current functional limitations imposed by the impairment (i.e., to what extent your day-to-day functioning is impaired by the hearing loss).*
- Detailed information about what therapy and auditory aids are being used to treat the impairment, and the effectiveness of these interventions, including any relevant post-therapy data*
- A specific recommendation for all accommodations requested, with an explanation of how the accommodations will reduce the impact of the identified functional limitations on the specific testing activity (this may be different for the CBT examinations vs. Step 2 CS).*

*Your request must specify whether you require use of hearing aids, cochlear implants, or other assistive listening devices for the day of your examination. Please provide specific information for any assistive listening device, including hearing aids, such as the make and model number, and a photo of the device for our review. Note that the photo should be of your own personal item that you are requesting to bring with you to the examination, not a generic photo of the make/model. At the conclusion of our review, you and your test center will be notified in writing of the item(s) approved for your use during the examination. This approval is necessary as unauthorized possession of personal items while in the secure area of the test center may lead to a finding of irregular behavior and permanent annotation of your USMLE transcript.*

### Personal item exemptions:

If you need to bring anything into the exam that is related to your disability and considered “non-standard” such as food, water or medication, a special cushion, hearing aids or cochlear implants and other medical devices, **you will need to have this approved in advance of the exam.** Some students are asked to send a photograph of their device as part of the approval process. These requests generally do not require the same “burden of

proof” that other accommodations require. Often the documentation requirement is a letter of support from a medical doctor stating the nature of the condition and the reason why the item is needed. We have reports of students needing to declare items like leg braces, crutches, etc. A good rule of thumb is to declare ANYTHING and allow the NBME to determine if such a declaration is not needed.

The NBME provides specific advice on this issue: <http://www.usmle.org/test-accommodations/PIEs.html>

## Newly Diagnosed or No History of Accommodations

If you do not have a history of accommodation or have been recently diagnosed with a disability You must answer the question “why now?” The NBME will want to know why you have successfully gained entry to medical school without accommodations, but now have difficulty accessing the education curriculum. The examiner who diagnosed you will also be required to speak to these issues.

### Application

All individuals wishing to apply for accommodations on the USMLE exams will be required to fill out a detailed application and must include their USMLE number. A copy of the application is attached to this guide.

### Scheduling the Exam

While under review you **will NOT** be able to schedule your exam. If you are approved for accommodations you will receive a registration ticket within 5 days of the approval and only then can you register for the exam.

### Testing Centers and Accommodated Testing

Students should identify for themselves several testing centers for testing. Some will fill quicker than others and when accommodated with assistive technology, extra-time, or a private room, students may have limited choices.

## The Personal Statement

### From the USMLE: The Personal Statement

*D3. Personal Statement Attach a signed and dated personal statement describing your impairments(s) and their impact on daily life. Narratives should not be confined to standardized test performance. The personal statement is your opportunity to tell us how your physical or mental impairment(s) substantially limit your current functioning in a major life activity. In your own words, discuss how your impairment(s) would interfere with your access to the relevant USMLE Step and how the specific accommodation(s) you are requesting will alleviate this impact.*

The USMLE requires a personal statement as part of the accommodation request application. This is often the most time-consuming part of the application process, but can be one of the most important and compelling parts of the request. **This is your only opportunity to share your personal experience of living with a disability.**

This personal statement is unique and should focus on your **areas of difficulty** rather than your strengths. It is not the time to talk about how well you have been doing. Rather, you will need to highlight what is difficult, what you do to manage it, and what remains a challenge. We understand this may feel counterintuitive and can be emotionally difficult – we are here to support you. You can meet with MSDS to discuss your personal statement and ask for feedback. While we do not provide extensive editing, we will work with you to help you best articulate your needs.

## Points of consideration for personal statements

1. **Explain** the nature of your disability and why you are requesting accommodations.

Include a description of the day-to-day impact of your disability - not just the impact on academic tasks, like taking exams (e.g., impact on interpersonal relationships, employment, course withdrawals, personal organization, driving record, financial management, etc).

2. **Focus** on your *areas of difficulty* rather than your strengths.

This can feel awkward, because oftentimes students with disabilities are taught to put their “best foot forward” and emphasize their strengths when speaking about themselves. However, the personal statement is not the time to talk about how well you have been doing. It is actually the place to emphasize and highlight what has been difficult. It is essential that you connect your accommodations to any successes.

The burden to prove that the requested accommodations are *necessary* is on the student. Be very clear about the barriers posed by the test, and the anticipated outcome if the accommodation you are requesting is not in place. The barrier must be grounded in the nature of your condition, and substantiated by the documentation you are providing.

3. **Pay close attention** to the *language* you use to describe your needs.

The cover letter should not refer to a *preference* for an accommodation, but rather should emphasize your *need* for the accommodation. Your job is to explain why the accommodations you are requesting are necessary to ensure your access to the exam.

For example, you should not say things like “I would do better with” or “to ensure my success,” as accommodations are designed to ensure *access*, not success. You should also avoid using phrases such as “learning differences,” as agencies are only interested in disabilities that require accommodations.

It can be difficult to start writing a personal statement. Appendix C is offered to help prompt your writing and provide an outline and topics that may/may not be relevant to your case. You can use these writing prompts as a guide to help you get started.

## **Appendix A: Detailed Timeline for UCSF Students:**

**Students who wait to declare their intent to apply for accommodations risk not receiving a decision in time to take the April exam. This can result in a delay in the start of clerkship or even put their medical curriculum on hold for a year.**

### **July**

- Speak with Dr. Lisa Meeks from Medical Student Disability Services (MSDS) to review documentation on file and make plans for applying for USMLE accommodations on the Step 1 exam.
- Draft personal statement
- Request MCAT official scores
- Collect additional documentation as necessary

### **August**

- Submit draft of personal statement to MSDS
- Provide additional documentation to MSDS
- Apply for NBME ID <https://apps.nbme.org/nlesweb/#/authenticate>

### **September-October**

- Complete application and personal statement “the packet” and submit to MSDS
- Mail, fax or e-mail (as a pdf) your completed request form and supporting documents to:  
Disability Services National Board of Medical Examiners  
3750 Market Street Philadelphia, PA 19104-3190  
Facsimile: (215) 590-9422  
E-mail: [disabilityservices@nbme.org](mailto:disabilityservices@nbme.org)
- Receive confirmation of your submission

### ***October-January (waiting period for decision)***

### **January**

- Craft an appeal (if necessary)

### **February-March**

- Reserve Testing Location/Date

### **April**

- Take Step 1

### **May/June (For those students in Option B)**

- Take Step 1

## Appendix B: General Checklist and Timeline for Accommodation Requests on the NBME Exams

Submit all materials: \_\_\_\_\_ (date)

At least 10 months before you plan to take the exam

- Find the information about the exam accommodation request process
- Find the deadline for making requests: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Identify the appeal procedure and any associated timelines
  - Aim to make your request at least 60 days **in advance** of their recommended deadline:
  - Currently the USMLE is taking up to 120 days to respond to initial inquiries
- Make a list of what historical documentation you need to gather:
  - All historical evaluations
  - Supplemental letters of support from previous instructors
  - Letters documenting historical accommodation approval
    - K-12
    - AP exams
    - SAT/ACT exams
    - Undergraduate
    - Post-bacc program
    - Graduate school
    - Workplace
    - Professional school
    - MCAT accommodations
- Locate the documentation requirements for making your request
  - Print a copy of the requirements
  - Compare your most recent documentation to the requirements
  - If your documentation doesn't match, identify the specific reasons why and make a list
  - If you'll need a new evaluation, begin contacting potential evaluators immediately to determine the cost and how soon you can be evaluated
    - Evaluators likely will want to see your historical evaluations
    - Will benefit from knowing what the requirements are for documentation
    - Share the list of things you feel are missing from your historical documentation
    - A good evaluator will summarize your historical evaluations and explain any inconsistencies between them, and between any new results.
    - Explain the deadline for submitting your application
- Schedule an appointment with your DS office to discuss your application
  - Disability Services office might have copies of your historical evaluations or other materials you can include
  - Make a request for a letter of support and for The Certification of Prior Test Accommodations form
  - Ask for tips and advice about your application, and inquire about other students' recent experiences.
  - Inquire about any financial support towards re-evaluation, and recommended referrals

At least 8 months before the exam

- Begin drafting your personal statement

## Appendix C: Topic Prompts for Personal Statements<sup>2</sup>

*Note: Respond only to the prompts that are relevant to your circumstances.*

- Explain the nature of your disability and why you are requesting accommodations.
  - Describe how it affects you in medical school (reading, writing, studying, in classroom, lab, clinic)
  - Include a description of the day-to-day impact of your disability (outside med school):
    - interpersonal relationships
    - personal organization
    - driving record
    - financial management
    - prior employment
    - reading for pleasure
  
- Explain your history of using accommodations in all settings.
  - K-12
  - Undergraduate
  - Other graduate programs
  - Previous standardized testing (MCAT, SAT, AP exams, other)
  - Employment
  - Medical school
    - What accommodations did you use?
    - What worked, what didn't?
    - What additional challenges did you face in the environment?
    - Were any accommodations provided informally that aren't documented? What were they and why aren't they able to be formally documented?
  
- If you do not have a long history of accommodations or have never utilized accommodations in the past:
  - Explain what is new now. Why are accommodations necessary at this time for this exam?
    - Is this exam different from others you have taken before? How?
    - Is your diagnosis recent? If so, how did the diagnosis come about?
      - What were the circumstances of your upbringing and/or early education that may help the evaluators to understand your late diagnosis/lack of accommodations?
      - What challenges did you face in your life before you were diagnosed?
        - In education
        - In your personal life
    - What strategies did you use to succeed in school and your personal life in the absence of formal diagnosis, treatment, and accommodations?
    - Is medical school different from your previous academic settings? How?
    - How did you get by before you had accommodations?
      - What strategies, services, supports, did you use?
      - What were the challenges and successes associated?
      - How are they insufficient for the medical school setting, and the USMLE exam in

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<sup>2</sup> Jain, N. & Bisagno, J. (April, 2016). Supporting Students Accommodation Requests on High Stakes Exams. *3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Disability in Health Science and Medicine Symposium*. San Francisco, CA.  
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particular?

- Did you request but were denied accommodations on previous standardized exams (e.g. MCAT)?
  - If so, how did you ultimately succeed sufficiently to gain admittance in medical school, despite not having accommodations for this exam?
  - What strategies and preparation were involved in your journey to medical school to bolster your application?
- Provide a rationale for each accommodation you are requesting
  - What barrier does the exam pose, and how is it tied to your disability?
  - If you have an example of a difference in performance with and without the accommodation, provide this.

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