

# READ THIS BEFORE MEDICAL SCHOOL

How to Study Smarter, and Live Better  
While Excelling in Class and on your  
**USMLE or COMLEX Board Exams**



Chase DiMarco, MS, MBA  
Greg Rodden, DO & Theodore X. O'Connell, MD

Copyright © 2019 by Chase DiMarco

Published by Indies United Publishing House, LLC

All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this publication may be replicated, redistributed, or given away in any form without the prior written consent of the author/publisher or the terms relayed to you herein.

Published October 2019

ISBN13:978-1-64456-072-3

Library of Congress Control Number:2019950745



INDIES UNITED PUBLISHING HOUSE, LLC

P.O. BOX 3071

QUINCY, IL 62305-3071

[www.indiesunited.net](http://www.indiesunited.net)

# About the Authors

**Chase DiMarco:** Chase is an MS, MBA-HA and MD/Ph.D-candidate. He is the Founder and educator at FreeMedEd, which he began in 2014 to consolidate free educational resources for his classmates. He also hosts the Medical Mnemonist Podcast, is Chief Development Officer at InsideTheBoards, and CEO of MedMatch Externships clinical rotations service. He has explored many facets of medical education, the psychology of learning, and accelerated learning techniques. As an average student, it wasn't until after he had attained graduate education that he learned to implement accelerated learning and educational efficiency. Now, with a passion to make studying easier for all students and bring great educational resources to the masses, he has worked to compile some of the top literature out there on Educational Psychology, Academic Medicine, and Memory.

**Greg Rodden:** Greg is a pediatrics resident in Austin, TX, and founder/host of the Med School Phys podcast. When he's not being a doctor for kids, he tries to stay happy and healthy by listening to podcasts & audiobooks on long walks, doting on his dog, and leisurely dining with his wife. Greg is dedicated to providing high-quality medical education to anyone who is willing to learn.

**Theodore X. O'Connell:** Ted is a family physician, educator, and author of many popular books, including the Crush Step series and the USMLE Step Secrets series. He is the founding director of the Family Medicine residency training program at Kaiser Permanente Napa-Solano and is an Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the UC San Francisco School of Medicine. Dr. O'Connell is passionate about helping the next generation of physicians become successful, both as clinicians and as future professionals who can confidently navigate medical culture. He hopes his collective works will help cultivate outstanding physicians.

# Read This Before Medical School

How to Study Smarter and Live Better While Excelling in Class  
and on Your USMLE or COMLEX Board Exams



# Table of Contents

## About the Authors

### PREFACE

How to Use this Book

Occam's Razor vs. Hickam's Dictum

A Doctor's Timeline

Other Career Options

## PART 1: OVERVIEW OF STUDY SKILLS & WORK-LIFE BALANCE

### Time in the Classroom

Class Participation

Effective Use of Your Professor's Time

Using School Resources

### Studies Outside of the Classroom

Creating the Ultimate Study Environmental

Pre-Study Preparation

Create a Study Plan

Efficiency & Time Management

Studying for the Big Exam

### Study Groups

Member Selection

Making a Game Plan for the Team

Improving Collaborative Skills

When it's Time to Change Things Up

### Optimizing Work, Life, and Work-Life Balance

Perception & Mindset

State & Self

Physical Health

Spiritual Health

Leadership and Branching Out

Ethics

### Part 1 Closing Thoughts

### References – Part 1

## PART 2 TEST PREPARATIONS AND EXAM DAY

Dissecting a Boards Question

History of the NBME, NBOME, USMLE, and COMLEX Exams

How to Approach and Prepare for the Boards

Becoming a Better Test-Taker

### Conquering the Worm

Basic Exam Technique and Common Errors

Tie-Breaker Technique and Post-Exam Autopsy

[Final Test Day Tips](#)

[Part 2 Closing Thoughts](#)

[References – Part 2](#)

[PART 3 ACCELERATED LEARNING AND MNEMONICS](#)

[Speed Reading](#)

[The SQ3R System](#)

[Pacers](#)

[Subvocalization](#)

[Saccadic Reading](#)

[Speed Training](#)

[Organize What You've Read](#)

[Memory Hacks & Techniques](#)

[Remembering vs. Forgetting](#)

[The \(Non\)Debate of Multitasking](#)

[Creating Personal Mnemonics](#)

[Creativity Visual Mnemonics and other Memory Tools](#)

[Basics of Visual Markers](#)

[Advanced Memory Training Techniques](#)

[Mind Mapping](#)

[Part 3 Closing Thoughts](#)

[References – Part 3](#)

[PART 4 SELF-ASSESSMENT](#)

[Journaling for a Better Life and Mind](#)

[Concrete Examples to Guide Your Practice](#)

[Next Steps](#)

[References – Part 4](#)

[APPENDIX](#)

# PREFACE

## How to Use this Book

First off, thank you for choosing to read this book. You will not regret it. We will provide you with a vast array of suggestions for studying, tools we personally used to excel in medical school, tips for self-improvement, and guidance to keep you on the path to success. This is not simply a “medical study resource,” but rather it is a guidebook filled with wisdom and pearls about everything related to your future career in medicine.

Some books will teach you how to make flashcards, some have tips for test-day, while others focus on efficiency and scheduling. This book incorporates all of those topics, and more! To scratch the surface, we will give you a tried and true approach to tackle board exam-style questions, tips to accelerate your learning speed, and advice on how to use flashcards, while also covering topics like burnout prevention during this challenging time in your life. There is currently NO OTHER resource that offers this much information, assembled together in one place, and without the fluff.

If you are already aware of some of the concepts discussed throughout, you’ve got a big headstart and we will help you to optimize your existing strategies. If it all seems new, don’t worry. We’ll explain everything in detail and provide concrete examples to help you get started. Discovering these kinds of learning techniques and strategies is probably best before you start medical school, but even if you’ve already begun classes, don’t be discouraged. There’s no time like the present!

We aim to provide you with a no-nonsense guide to success in medical school and beyond. As such, we have researched, analyzed, and synthesized dozens of top-rated books, hundreds of research papers, and years of experience in medicine and education to create an excellent product. It would be impossible for us to perform a systematic review of every subject we cover, but we gave it our best shot.

Regardless, it’s healthy to question everything you see, hear, and read these days (without being a contrarian). Remain reasonable and open-minded if you encounter something new here. We urge you to experiment, record the results, reassess, rinse and repeat. When you’ve found something that works, we urge you to engage in Deliberate Practice to maximize your results. But

let's not get ahead of ourselves; this is just the introduction.

If you have already skimmed through the Table of Contents, you may have noticed the overarching structure of this book, which is broken up into four main parts:

**Part 1: Overview of Study Skills & Work-Life Balance**

**Part 2: Test Preparation and Exam Day**

**Part 3: Accelerated Learning and Mnemonics**

**Part 4: Self-Assessment**

Considering how much content we cover, you should not feel obligated to follow along section-by-section. Some areas may be of greater relevance to you right now, while others can take a back seat. **Jump from section to section as needed.** We thank you for your support and hope you enjoy the book.

# Occam's Razor vs. Hickam's Dictum

Advising learners on something as complicated as medical education is tricky. No two students are the same, so we need to be flexible when providing advice about the approach to learning, the best resources, and the study habits to reinforce. Ultimately, you have to find what works for you. One topic might be learned best by a familiar or obvious method, while another lesson may require uncomfortable or outside-the-box thinking. This is a sort of *Occam's Razor vs. Hickam's Dictum* situation for your medical education where the simplest solution is the best... until it isn't.

Herein, we attempt to provide a wealth of different recommendations and educational strategies that you can explore. It will require you to spend a little more time upfront to determine what works best for you. A word of caution: you will be tempted to first choose the method that you LIKE best, but keep in mind that it may not be the method that WORKS best for you. This is where an open mind and honest self-assessment will really show their value. Throughout the text, we encourage regular self-assessment and we provide plenty of concrete examples to see how you can gauge your performance.

# A Doctor's Timeline

Before diving into how to thrive in medical school, we should probably lay out the timeline for you. What will your life look like when going through your medical training? Obviously, there will be variations on this theme, but here's the basic timeline for someone who goes straight from undergrad to attending physician:

Year 1	Spring	Finish Undergrad
	Fall	Start MS1 - Preclinical studies (basic sciences)
Year 2	Fall	Start MS2 - Preclinical studies (basic sciences)
	Spring	USMLE Step 1 or COMLEX Level 1 - Multiple choice exam
Year 3	Fall	Start MS3 - Clinical rotations
	Spring	USMLE CS or COMLEX PE - Standardized patient encounters
		USMLE Step 2 or COMLEX Level 2 - Multiple choice exam
Year 4	Fall	Start MS4 - Clinical rotations
		ERAS - Submit applications to residency programs
	Spring	Residency Match Day
		Finish Medical School
Year 5	PGY1	Intern year
		USMLE Step 3 or COMLEX Level 3 - Multiple choice exam
Year 6	PGY2	
Year 7+	PGY3+	Residency length depends on the program
...		
Optional	Fellowship	Typically 1-3 years of subspecialty training
...		
Goal		Attending Physician

Don't freak out after seeing this! Yes, you've got a long way to go, but if you're passionate about patient care and medical science, you belong on this path.

## Other Career Options

Most doctors begin their journey of medical education in the same way. We worked hard during college and stressed out about getting into medical school. Then, we worked hard and stressed out about passing boards and getting a good residency. Some repeat the cycle for fellowship. And then we stress out about our patients, our business, and our administrative duties. While life in medicine is rewarding, it can also be very stressful!

Most doctors do not seriously consider anything other than the default pathway into clinical practice. If this is your goal, great. If you are unsure, also great. Why? Because there is a significant need for highly skilled and educated professionals both in clinical practice and outside of the hospital. If you have never been educated on the other options, or you were never taught the skills related to success in fields outside of medicine, you may feel like you have no other choice. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Within the confines of this book, we cannot comprehensively teach about all of the important skills for leadership, business, and education related to medicine (and other professions), but we will offer solid advice from trusted resources for your own exploration. If you're unsure about where you want to take your MD or DO degree, just take a moment to peek outside of the bubble. You can start with a website like [Docjobs.com](https://www.docjobs.com). Just becoming aware of the other options available to you can significantly alleviate the stress you may be feeling.