

NPLEX/NABNE Board Examinations: Study Tips

I. Introduction

This treatise provides some suggestions concerning study approaches that may be helpful in approaching the NPLEX/NABNE Board Examinations. Please note that these suggestions are for informational purposes only and do not represent an official “study guide” sanctioned by either NPLEX or NABNE.

A. Strategy

A couple of things to consider.

First, even though it may not seem like it when you are going through it, in almost all situations no one wants to see you fail an examination. Institutions typically have a vested interest in having you succeed, even if that incentive is only financial in some cases.

Second, you need a strategy. That is, you need a plan on how to go about dealing with whatever it is you are studying for. If you do not have a strategy, there is the very real potential of collapsing under the weight of all the material you need to review. It is very similar to planning a wedding. In putting together a wedding, you need a bigger view that coordinates the decorations, invitations, color scheme, food, and so. Similarly, you will need a bigger view of your objectives when studying for an exam or you will find yourself struggling in the final weeks, trying to make all the pieces come together. More specific information about strategies is included below, but a brief overview is provided here.

For the sake of example, let’s say that you are studying for a cluster of examinations, such as finals or board examinations. If you look at the task you have before you, you will find that you will have to allocate, from the beginning, an appropriate amount of time for each test. Here is one way to think about how to do this.

1. Generally, the bulk of your review will be for your biggest or hardest tests. It is critical to include time for quizzing yourself as this gives you a dress rehearsal in what you will actually be doing during the examinations.
2. Usually each person has an area that they know well. Figure out what this is and leave it till the end. You may only need to review this particular area.
3. Use the information included below to figure out how much review time you have. Then divide it up between the exams. You then need to **track** how much time you are spending each day on each subject so you can monitor that all the subjects are at least getting some attention. Without this system, the tendency will be for your time to drift into the large subjects or an area you feel you will not do well in. The result will be large areas of unreviewed material that you will have to try and rush through at the last minute.
4. For some areas, you may need supplemental texts.

In order to approach any examination intelligently, it is important to understand something about its structure. Take the time to review and understand how you will be tested (e.g. essay, multiple choice, etc.)

B. General Test Question Structure

In general, there are 6 different cognitive levels at which you may be tested on any examination. These are listed below. In the table following this section, we have further detailed these cognitive levels and have indicated the study tools that are helpful in achieving mastery for each one.

Cognitive Level I: *Recall*. Knowing the correct terminology (i.e. recognizing a symptom pattern, knowing a lab value, etc.). Basic entry level knowledge.

Cognitive Level II: *Comprehension.* Understanding the implications/consequences of a concept.

Cognitive Level III: *Application.* Applying knowledge of how to apply knowledge. Basically tests pattern recognition.

Cognitive Level IV: *Analysis.* Analyzing reasons and explanations (i.e. knowing why an answer is correct). Tests your ability to reason deductively and then defend that reasoning.

Cognitive Level V: *Synthesis.* Synthesizing all relevant data; being able to ascertain what is important, what is missing, etc. This level is looking at your ability to rule in or rule out a hypotheses by knowing which information is relevant to making a definitive assessment.

Cognitive Level VI: *Evaluation.* Ability to evaluate various treatment and procedural options. Pattern recognition at a higher level.

Types of Test Questions and Study Approach To Them

	Recall	Comprehension	Application	Analysis	Synthesis	Evaluation
Definition	Know terms, facts, theories, concepts, trends, categories, criteria, and methods.	Ability to translate, interpret, and extrapolate.	Use principles and procedures to solve life-like problems.	Break the whole into parts, relationships, and organizational principles.	Combine data to produce a unique plan, abstract relationships or set of hypotheses	Judge the value based on internal evidence or external criteria.
Terms Test Questions	Define Tell List Who What When Where	Describe Diagram Illustrate State How Many	If...then What if...	Justify Discuss Why How does this work?	Explain Outline Prove Relate Summarize	Interpret Weigh Evaluate
Study Tasks	<i>Locate and regurgitate explicit parts or concepts:</i> Vocabulary Criteria Definitions	<i>Accurately paraphrase explicit parts or concepts.</i>	<i>Solve problems.</i> <i>Pattern recognition.</i>	<i>Deductive reasoning:</i> Cause/Effect Pro/Con Relational dialectics	<i>Hypothesis consolidation</i> Rule in Rule out Importance	<i>Assessment:</i> Appropriateness Relevance Internal consistency Importance Efficacy
Study Strategy	Structuring Instantiation Context Multiple coding	Structuring Context Instantiation Multiple coding	Instantiation Fractional-Isetan	Context Inferencing	Context Multiple coding	Inferencing Monitoring
Study Methods	Flash cards Glossaries Drawing Graphing Outlining	Flash cards Glossaries Diagramming Study groups Grids Mind Maps	Drawing on clinical experience. Old tests	Case studies Grids Mind Maps Time lines Process lines	Hypothesis generation Study group Flow chart Problem solving	Case studies Review sheets Know contra-indications

C. General Multiple Choice Exam Strategy

Basically, multiple choice questions consist of a stem and 4 or 5 options, 1 of which is correct and the others being distracters. There is typically a correct answer, a nearly correct answer, and two or others that are more easily eliminated. You can treat the options as series of True/False proposals. To work through the question quickly and efficiently, use the following question analysis strategy

1. Note all key words and qualifiers (not, sometimes, always, etc.). Some texts suggest underlining or circling these. This will cut down on the ability of the distracters to do just that.
2. Look for little clues like similar grammar, number, or tense. Also, if you are not sure of the right answer, assess which one of the alternatives is the most REASONABLE, give your knowledge base. This is where a strong basic science background will be very helpful.
3. Can put slashes through obviously wrong answers, T? for probably true and F? for probably false. This marking system takes advantage of your first impressions, which have a higher percentage of being right. An adjunct to this is don't change your first answer without a good reason.
4. It is usually recommended not to wait till the end of the test to transfer your answers from the booklet or worksheet to the actual test. This is due not only to the devastation that will occur if you run out of time before you can transfer your answers but also to the possibility of transcription errors. It is also recommended that you not leave blanks for the same reason. Take your best guess, mark a question mark in the question and move on. This will enable you to maximize the number of questions you can address.

In addition to question mechanics, it is also important to have a sense of pacing yourself during the exam. A good rule of thumb is 1 minute per question on average. Check yourself every 30 minutes to get a sense of how you are doing.

II. Study System

A. Learning Strategies

1. Though almost everyone uses learning strategies, some students use them better and more extensively than others. The focus of this section is to delineate what the learning strategies are and discuss how you can use them to maximize retention of the study material.

There are **7 basic learning strategies**:

- a. **The structuring strategy**: this refers to searching for the structure or organization of the material under study (i.e. category, hierarchy, network, etc.) Doing so helps you understand concepts and their relationship to other concepts. In a test situation, knowing the structure gives you an advantage in remembering the material because knowing where a concept sits in an organizational hierarchy can help you to remember its functions and attributes.

b. **The context strategy:** the context strategy involves a search for relationships between the things to be learned and the things we already know. This is actually one of the main tasks of studying – making connections between our own network of data and the new material presented to us. The use of analogies or examining the root meaning of unfamiliar words are good examples. This strategy is particularly useful at the Recall, Analysis, and Synthesis levels.

c. **Monitoring:** this strategy involves testing yourself to find out what you know and what you don't know. This assessment can then guide future study. The most common way to do this is to test yourself at regular intervals, which is important at all levels of study. Another monitoring activity is to ask yourself questions while you are studying. This application is particularly useful at the Evaluation level.

d. **Inferencing:** as the name implies, this strategy has to do with making inferences about the material being studied. Doing so makes you a more active learner, which has been shown to increase retention and the ability to understand complex relationships. This strategy is related to monitoring because it involves asking questions about the material studied, and it is related to the context strategy because it explores the relationship of other knowledge to the material being learned. Its objective, however, is to generate questions about the material in order to evaluate its usefulness, validity, or appropriateness. One inferencing technique is called *fractionalization* – breaking concepts down to their simplest components or words. Good for the Analysis and Evaluation levels of studying.

e. **Instantiation:** a fancy term for generating examples of the concept under study. Good for the Recall, Comprehension, and Application levels of study.

f. **Multiple coding:** basically involves representing the material in as many ways as possible. This can be done by using study groups, paraphrasing, using images and so on. This strategy is often used in generating mnemonics or in memorizing a procedural sequence. Useful at the Recall, Comprehension, and Synthesis levels.

g. **Attention management:** involves methods to assist in 3 crucial areas: time management, concentration, and maintaining energy levels. Included at the end of the study skills section is a sheet designed to assist with the area of concentration management. For time management, *The Tao of Time* by Diana Hunt is an excellent and helpful book

2. A study system should utilize **all** of these 7 strategies. A study system that does so, based on the system developed by Donald Dansereau, is briefly presented here.

B. Study Protocol: MURDER

Dansereau's MURDER system presents a simple and effective way to maximize one's study time. It has been somewhat modified to make it more applicable to post-graduate uses. The acronym is explained below.

Mood: involves creating the most supportive environment for studying – physically, intellectually, and emotionally. The two main tasks here are creating a positive attitude and coping with distractions. Use attention management strategies together with a psychoemotional image of yourself as a competent learner to create the optimal milieu for studying.

Understand: the basic reception stage of study. Deals with the tasks of the Recall and Comprehension levels: learning vocabulary, understanding concepts, etc. Use the instantiation, context, structuring, and multiple coding strategies.

Re-organize: this is where you put concepts into your own words and fit them together with what you already know (the organizational stage of learning). It deals with the tasks of the Comprehension, Application, and some of the Analysis levels. Use the context, inferencing, instantiation and multiple coding strategies.

Digest: this is the where the highest levels of learning occur: the Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation levels. At this point (the internalization stage of learning) you are dealing with consolidation and higher level application issues. Use the context, inferencing, monitoring and multiple coding strategies. If you find yourself re-formulating your internal representation of the material, use the structuring strategy.

Evaluate: this is the stage where you pause and evaluate your progress, both in terms of depth and breadth of learning. The periodic quizzes or review of old test questions will help you to discover any holes in your conceptual network. Use the monitoring strategy.

Review: this is the transmission stage of learning and an area critical to your success. In the last two weeks before your exam, you should be spending 80% of your time doing review type activities, from using review sheets to actually taking timed practice test and quizzes. If you find a weakness in your knowledge base, go back to the material, assess the deficit, and use the appropriate tool or strategy to address it.

III. Miscellaneous Study Concepts

A. Mind Maps

1. Mind maps are easy to create. Start with a concept or category (disease, modality, process, etc.) that you wish to assess. Place this in the center of a piece of paper and circle it – this is called a *node*.
2. Think about all the categories associated with this concept, write them around the main node and circle them. Connect them to the main node with lines.
3. Now try to think of everything you know about this concept/subject and connect them to these various categories. If you need new categories, create them.
4. When you are finished, compare to your notes or your review text. Write in the material you missed in a different color. If you have too many mistakes return to the material and apply the appropriate strategies for retention.
5. This is a good review tool as well as a good tool to help you get warmed up for studying.

B. Memory Tips

1. Knowing and familiarity are not the same thing. A great temptation in studying for the boards is to think that because you have seen it before you know the material. Familiarity does not insure that you will be able to recall the material in an actual test taking environment.
2. Layered learning improves recall and performance. Layered learning means approaching studying in a repetitive, sustained fashion such that the mind has a chance to create links to other concepts. Basically, this principle states that it is better to study 4 hours a day for 5 days than to study 10 hours per day for 2 days.
3. Address physical needs as soon as they arise. They usually do not go away and they are distracting.