

Preparing for the NBCOT[®] Examination Day 1

Section

1

Getting Started

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Learning Objectives

- Identify critical materials needed for exam review preparation.
- Differentiate between the three domains of the occupational therapy assistant board exam.
- Construct a reflective journal.
- Identify current stress score and strategies to address any potential challenges.

Introduction

Preparing for the Occupational Therapy Assistant National Board Exam: 45 Days and Counting is unlike any examination book currently available to occupational therapy assistant (OTA) students. Through research utilizing a focus group model, as well as individual interviews, we learned what students preparing for this examination need and want to optimize their success. Therefore, we have compiled a content review—based on a great majority of the most commonly used textbooks in OTA education, advice from an item-writing specialist, as well as an online bank of simulation test questions.

Guidebook at a Glance

The main theme of this book utilizes chapter content on subject matter that is learned throughout OTA curricula using a lexicon taken from the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (OTPF) III (American Occupational Therapy Association, 2014). Each chapter is divided into topics taught throughout OTA curricula in the United States. From those topics—and using the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT®)

Practice Analysis (National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy [NBCOT®], 2012) as a guide—this book was designed for you to begin the 45-day journey and, at the end, feel prepared and ready to take the NBCOT® examination. The *Practice Analysis* provides a summary of the research used to guide construction of the board exam. Therefore, it is highly suggested that you take time to review this document at this time. Focus on the areas of practice and diagnoses typically covered so you can better judge how much time to spend on specific areas. If followed according to the suggested study guide calendar (see **Table 1-1**), you could begin and end your preparation for the board exam within 45 days. Please note that the study guide calendar is a suggestion, and we encourage you to prepare for this exam based on your own specific contexts given work, family, and other obligations that may either expedite or impede you from completing within the given time frame. Nonetheless, this study guide calendar provides a plan on how to review much of the content covered within an OTA curriculum, while allowing for time to focus on test-taking practice and strategies. If you choose to use an alternate calendar, make sure to print one off so that it can provide you with a focus to stay on task during your exam preparation.

Although this book is structured to complete your studies within 45 days, it is important that you have a sense of confidence and security, which will result from your test preparation, before scheduling a date to take the examination. When you complete (or come close to completing) the 45 days of test preparation, you will have a better idea of when you should schedule your examination. It is important to check the NBCOT® website when planning your application process, since there is waiting period before you will receive your Authorization to Test letter. After you receive your letter, you can typically schedule your exam right away.

Table 1-1 Study Guide Calendar

| Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 | Day 5 |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Chapters 1, 2, and 3 | Chapters 4, 5, and 6 | Chapter 7 | Chapter 8 | Chapter 9 Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 6 | Day 7 | Day 8 | Day 9 | Day 10 |
| Chapter 10 | Chapter 11 | Chapter 12 | Chapter 13 | Chapters 14 and 15 Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 11 | Day 12 | Day 13 | Day 14 | Day 15 |
| Chapters 16 and 17 | Chapter 18 | Chapter 19 | Chapter 20 | Chapters 21 and 22 Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 16 | Day 17 | Day 18 | Day 19 | Day 20 |
| Chapters 23 and 24 | Chapters 25 and 26 | Chapter 27 | Chapter 28 | Chapter 29 Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 21 | Day 22 | Day 23 | Day 24 | Day 25 |
| Chapter 30 | Chapters 31 and 32 | Chapter 33 | Chapters 34 and 35 | Chapters 36 and 37 Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 26 | Day 27 | Day 28 | Day 29 | Day 30 |
| Chapters 38 and 39 | Chapter 40 | Chapters 41 and 42 | Review any material that you feel necessary today | Complete your review today Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 31 | Day 32 | Day 33 | Day 34 | Day 35 |
| Begin test-taking practice today! Take first practice test Locate the center you will be taking the test. Once you know the day and time, make sure to plan a visit at that day and time of the week! | Review correct and incorrect answers | Review correct and incorrect answers as well as the six-option multiple answer questions | Take second practice test Schedule test if you feel ready | Review correct and incorrect answers Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 36 | Day 37 | Day 38 | Day 39 | Day 40 |
| Review correct and incorrect answers, as well as the six-option multiple answer questions | Take third practice test Review any content that was difficult during practice | Review correct and incorrect answers | Review correct and incorrect answers, as well as the six-option multiple answer questions | Take fourth practice test Stress scale and reflection |
| Day 41 | Day 42 | Day 43 | Day 44 | Day 45 |
| Review correct and incorrect answers | Review correct and incorrect answers, as well as the six-option multiple answer questions | Final review areas of difficulty | Continue review until confident with the results and REST! | Downtime! |

Additionally, each chapter includes self-study activities to help reinforce memorization and learning. The online component accompanying this text consists of interactive practice examinations. The questions cover content as specified in the chapter study guides and are appropriately distributed using the NBCOT® domain areas (NBCOT®, 2013). There are three COTA® domains that cover obtaining information on occupational performance throughout the Occupational therapy (OT) process, intervention implementation, and management. It is important to take time to review how these three domains are defined, as well as the percentage of the exam that each domain covers. Each exam question provides a rationale for correct answers along with references for your convenience. Furthermore, practice test results can be calculated to provide you with specific domain area percentage scores so you will know what areas you need to spend more time on. Evidence-based practice also guided the formation of each chapter. Furthermore, references used throughout this exam review book feature robust levels of evidence to provide the student with the most current and accurate information available.

Study Tools for Success

- Answer sheets to various self-study activities.
- Unique instructional materials that provide the learner with a creative means by which to learn and discover the content.
- Over 1,000 practice examination questions that can be taken to simulate the actual exam. Although it is not possible for us—or any other exam prep book that is not affiliated with NBCOT®—to receive item-writing assistance from past OTA item writers, we do have a physical therapist item-writing specialist who has edited all question content to ensure they meet the standards and guidelines that are comparable to NBCOT® standards.
- Multiple-step case studies are modeled after the clinical simulation test questions. Log onto the online portal and follow directions to the practice questions, tests, and multiple-step case studies.
- This text incorporates a holistic view of study skills and habits that contribute to a healthy examination preparation process. Wellness tips and the opportunity for self-assessment reinforce healthy lifestyle choices that are conducive to success. Every week you will be asked to perform a self-assessment in the areas of sleep, nutrition, exercise, and stress. This will be completed using the Stress Vulnerability Scale (please see **Table 1-2**).
- If you begin to notice that your stress scale score is high or steadily increasing, please refer to **Table 1-3**, which provides suggestions on how to identify and manage your stress.
- You should consider getting at least one to two weeks of restorative or quality sleep (i.e., eight hours of uninterrupted sleep per day) leading up to the exam. These activities will serve as a reminder of the importance of taking care of yourself and are meant to reinforce key traits (e.g., flexibility, organization, and person-centeredness) that will enable you to become a productive and effective occupational therapist.
- A weekly reflective learning journaling section, courtesy of Live Wire Media, is provided using a three-question reflective learning approach with which students learn individual areas to focus on and prioritize. Research suggests that reflection “illuminates what has been experienced by [one’s] self . . . providing a basis for future action” (Raelin 2001, p. 11). Each week you are asked to answer the following questions (see **Table 1-4**):
 1. **What?** What have I accomplished? What have I learned?
 2. **So what?** What difference did it make? Why should I do it? How is it important? How do I feel about it?
 3. **Now what?** What’s next? Where do I go from here?
- Test-taking strategies and things to do prior to, and directly after, the exam are provided, with a focus on adult learning and test-taking strategies.
- Additionally, you will be directed to the NBCOT® website where you can download study tools to assist in the formulation of a personalized study plan to help keep you on track throughout this important process. This not only provides a focus, but will inevitably guide the identification of your strengths, weaknesses, and personal challenges. It is also very important to become familiar with the NBCOT® website (NBCOT®, 2015), where you will find the application and forms you need to complete in order to take the test, the certification handbook, practice analysis, guide for international students, special accommodations provisions, examination preparation tools, scoring calendar, and many other useful links and downloads.

Table 1-2 Stress Vulnerability Scale

In modern society, most of us cannot avoid stress. But we can learn to behave in ways that lessen its effects. Researchers have identified a number of factors that affect one's vulnerability to stress—among them are eating and sleeping habits, caffeine and alcohol intake, and how we express our emotions. The following questionnaire is designed to help you discover your vulnerability quotient and to pinpoint trouble spots. Rate each item from 1 (always) to 5 (never), according to how much of the time the statement is true of you. Be sure to mark each item, even if it does not apply to you—for example, if you do not smoke, circle 1 next to item six.

| | Always | Sometimes | Never | | |
|--|---|-----------|-------|---|---|
| 1. I eat at least one hot, balanced meal a day. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. I get 7–8 hours of sleep at least four nights a week. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. I give and receive affection regularly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. I have at least one relative within 50 miles on whom I can rely. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. I exercise to the point of perspiration at least twice a week. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. I limit myself to less than half a pack of cigarettes a day. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 7. I take fewer than five alcohol drinks a week. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. I am the appropriate weight for my height. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. I have an income adequate to meet basic expenses. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 10. I get strength from my religious beliefs. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 11. I regularly attend club or social activities. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 12. I have a network of friends and acquaintances. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 13. I have one or more friends to confide in about personal matters. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 14. I am in good health (including eyesight, hearing, and teeth). | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 15. I am able to speak openly about my feelings when angry or worried. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 16. I have regular conversations with the people I live with about domestic problems—for example, chores and money. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 17. I do something for fun at least once a week. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 18. I am able to organize my time effectively. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 19. I drink fewer than three cups of coffee (or other caffeine-rich drinks) a day. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 20. I take some quiet time for myself during the day. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Scoring Instructions: To calculate your score, add up the figures and subtract 20. | Self-Care Plan: Notice that nearly all the items describe the situations and behaviors over which you have a great deal of control. Review the items on which you scored three or higher. List those items in your self-care plan. Concentrate first on those that are easiest to change—for example, eating a hot, balanced meal daily and having fun at least once a week—before tackling those that seem difficult. | | | | |
| Score Interpretation: A score below 10 indicates excellent resistance to stress. A score over 30 indicates some vulnerability to tackling stress. A score over 50 indicates serious vulnerability to stress. | | | | | |

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Table 1-3 Stress Busters**Tips and Techniques for Managing Stress and Introducing Relaxation into Your Life****What Is Stress?**

Stress is the physiological and psychological response of the body to some sort of threat to our safety, self-esteem, or well-being. Stressors can be physical (e.g., illness), social (e.g., a relationship breakup or other loss), circumstantial (e.g., a poor exam grade or moving), or psychological (e.g., low self-esteem or worry). Often, transitions or changes, such as a new semester or new job, can bring on stress.

We are all under stress every day. A certain amount of stress helps us all to function better, keep ourselves safe from harm, and get things done during the day. Too much stress, however, can lead to physical illness, difficulty concentrating, or feelings of sadness or isolation.

Did You Know?

Most college campuses and communities have counseling and psychological services available for students and community residents at low cost. If the stress you experience interferes meaningfully with your ability to work, study, engage in positive social interactions, or feel okay, having an individual assessment and counseling for stress reduction and relaxation may be helpful. In a supportive environment, clients learn new stress reduction techniques and create an individualized plan to manage stress.

What Are the Symptoms of Stress?

Everyone responds to stress in different ways. What might be stressful for one person may be another person's hobby. In a similar way, everyone reacts differently to stress. Common stress reactions include

- Muscle tension or soreness in the back and shoulders
- Stomach troubles or digestive distress
- Difficulty falling asleep or waking early
- Increased heart rate or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Lack of interest or boredom
- Engaging in destructive behaviors (e.g., drinking too much alcohol, overeating)
- Inability to concentrate
- Avoidance or fear of people, places, or tasks

In addition, stress can lead to more serious problems, such as depression, anxiety, hypertension, and other illnesses. These symptoms may also be caused by medical or psychological conditions other than stress.

Remember, chronic stress can have long-term effects on health and well-being, so if your symptoms are severe or prolonged, get outside support. If stress becomes too much to manage on your own, schedule a visit to see a qualified healthcare provider.

Questions to Ask Yourself About Your Stress

- What are the primary sources of stress in my life?
- What are the signs and symptoms in my body that let me know I am stressed?
- What have I done that worked in the past to manage my stress?
- What can I do to integrate more relaxation into my daily routine?
- What do I want to do today to resolve my stress and work toward relaxation?

Effective Ways to Manage Your Stress

- Think about possible causes of your stress and be active in reducing stress. Small shifts in your thinking, behaviors, or breathing can make a very big difference.
- Avoid stress-producing situations. Although it is not always possible, many stressful situations can be avoided. Watch for places where you can avoid inviting stress; seek out places to relax.
- Engage in some regular exercise, which has been shown to alleviate the impact of stress. Choose an assortment of tension-building and tension-releasing exercises; remember that even small doses help! Take a quick walk, stretch in your office, even simple stretches help!

(continues)

Table 1-3 Stress Busters (*continued*)**Tips and Techniques for Managing Stress and Introducing Relaxation into Your Life**

- Examine if the way that you are thinking about your life (e.g., perfectionist thinking) is adding to or decreasing your stress. Are there other ways to think about the situation that is less stress inducing? Are there positive thoughts you could integrate into your daily thinking?
- Engage in activities that you enjoy and that give you an outlet for thinking about other things besides your stress.
- Increase your social connections. . . find other people who can relate to your experience. Do stress-busting activities together! Talk about the stressor and your plan to resolve your stress!
- Take good care of your body. . . eat well, get enough sleep, and avoid alcohol and drugs, which can increase stress.
- Use self-relaxation techniques like deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and visualizing successes or relaxing places (provided later).
- Download soothing music or music that makes you smile, and listen to it when you are feeling stressed.
- Search for meditation podcasts that are specific to your needs (e.g., pregnancy meditation, reducing test-taking anxiety). Many podcasts are available online and free!
- Consider writing a list of your stresses, including ways to address those stresses. Sometimes even the act of writing the list can ease worry. Start checking items off your list!
- Find your own optimal stress relievers. Is it changing your thoughts? A physical activity? A social occasion? Look for the healthy ways that help you to feel less stressed and do them!

From the Expert!

In his research, Stanford Professor and expert on stress Dr Robert Sapolsky has identified four important components of reducing stress, which include

1. Predictive information, such as a sign that the stress is going to be increasing (e.g., knowing a test date). That awareness gives us more control over our stress reactions.
2. Finding an outlet for dealing with stress (e.g., exercise, meditation, deep breathing).
3. Having a positive outlook or belief that life is going to get better, rather than get worse.
4. Having friends. Social support from others is an important component in keeping stress levels down.

Some Relaxation Techniques to Get You Started

- Try deep breathing exercises. Lie or sit in a comfortable position with your muscles relaxed, and take a few deep breaths. With your hand on your belly, feel your belly rise and fall as you inhale and exhale. Work toward breathing in to a slow count to five.
- 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . Exhale slowly. Rely on this technique when you start to feel stressed.
- When your body feels tense, take 3 minutes to sit or lie down quietly and focus on calming all of the muscle groups in your body. Begin with the muscles in your feet and slowly work your way up your body. Relax your legs, back muscles, chest, arms, hands, cheeks, and forehead. You may wish to focus on areas that feel tense or where you are experiencing pain. Breathe air into those areas. Relaxing all of the major muscle groups will help your whole body feel at ease.
- If you are anticipating a stressful event, such as taking an exam or a difficult social interaction, take a few moments to visualize the event going well. See yourself experiencing success. Envision the details of what you might say or do that will result in positive outcomes. If negative thoughts or images occur, take a deep breath and refocus on the positive. Invite a successful outcome through visualization!
- After doing some breathing and muscle relaxation, or just taking time to rest, take a moment to calm your thoughts and visualize a peaceful place in your mind, either a place you have been or would like to go. Allow your body to relax more and your mind to calm. Take just 10 minutes! Recognize that you can go to that peaceful place in your mind and feel relief from life's stressors whenever you need a break!

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Table 1-4 Reflection Journal

1. **What?** What have I accomplished? What have I learned?

2. **So what?** What difference did it make? Why should I do it? How is it important? How do I feel about it?

3. **Now what?** What's next? Where do I go from here?

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Focus Group Transcript Results

Before planning of this examination guidebook began, we called on our alumni to attend a focus group or participate in surveys or individual interviews to provide us insight that we could implement into our book and pass along to future graduates. The results were as follows, beginning with themes and ending with specific questions.

Preparation

- Prepare for approximately six weeks at a minimum, and spend some time alone and some time together in small groups.
- Take tests repeatedly.
- Do not focus on studying what you already know.

Materials for Preparation

- NBCOT® materials are popular and similar to exam questions.
- Other materials were too vague and concrete, with only one-step questions.
- The national review course was helpful but overwhelming.

- Other materials were not helpful for critical thinking.
- The rationale for correct answers is very important.

Answering Multiple Choice Questions

- Practice combining diagnosis with treatment in multistep questions.
- Learn how to dissect questions.

Test Environment

- The environment was anxiety provoking.
- The room was cold.

Helpful Suggestions

- Most focus group students took off weekends from studying.
- Make sure you focus on spinal cord injury levels of function related to levels of injury and relevant equipment!
- Watch your caffeine intake.
- Go to the bathroom halfway through the test, even if you do not need to go.

- Take the clock off the computer screen if it is anxiety provoking.
- Visit the site the day before and walk in to get a feel for the environment.
- Dress in comfortable layers.
- Do not study the night before.
- Sleep eight hours the night before.
- Choose a time to take the exam that fits your personality.
- Volunteer at a site that you do not feel enough exposure to.

Questions and Answers

The following are some specific questions that were asked and answered by the students in the focus group:

Q: Are the questions presented one at a time?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you mark them and go back to them, and how does that work?

A: Yes, after you complete the questions, a list comes up of questions you marked to look at again.

Q: After you answer, can you change the answer later, even after you click on a selection?

A: Yes.

Q: What is the best piece of advice you can give a student who is preparing to answer the questions on this examination?

A: Eliminate two answers first from the options presented, and then reread the question to make sure your answer fits exactly what the question asks!

Q: Give your best description of your testing area or environment.

A: There were rows of computers with cubicle dividers, and you can wear headphones to block out sounds. Other people are writing different tests (e.g., Graduate Record Exam). The test room consisted of approximately 30 individuals.

Q: What are you allowed to bring into the testing center?

A: They give you a blank sheet of paper and a pen (some got a dry erase board). You cannot bring water, but you can take a break and leave for water or the bathroom. There were lockers where we had to leave our purses, etc., outside the testing room.

Q: Identify any mnemonics or charts that were helpful during your study preparation.

A: Charts and handouts with a short summary of infant and child reflexes/patterns were really helpful (e.g., Moro, Babinski, asymmetrical tonic neck reflex, symmetrical tonic neck reflex). Also, a synopsis of the most common splints was very helpful. It helped to have a page at a glance, with a picture of each splint and a short description, including the name and use for each. In addition, reviewing frames of reference for psychosocial and physical disabilities, manual muscle test, Ranchos, Glasgow Coma Scale, and range of motion norms/scales was very useful. Any kind of handout or page at a glance is helpful to reinforce the information into memory.

Q: Is there anything else you can remember about the exam and what was and was not allowed?

A: Be able to use clinical reasoning skills in terms of reading a treatment scenario and deciding on the best option. There were always one or two answers that were definitely wrong and two that seemed to be correct. I remember always having to narrow down out of the two, which was the *better* choice.

Q: Did you learn about how to take the test through a tutorial or as you went?

A: There were two tutorials (one for the multiple choice items and the other for the clinical simulation test items), and it did not take up any examination time.

Q: Please provide any additional comments regarding what you found helpful in preparing to take the exam.

A: The most helpful thing for me was to repeatedly take practice exams. I would go back and study the areas on the practice tests that I got wrong. I also spent a lot of time studying the basics and making sure those were embedded in my memory as a knowledge base for any type of question they might throw at me. Know the various scales, norms, reflexes, most common splints, contraindications for certain diagnoses, etc. Spend time studying with a few friends, quizzing one another, and discussing why an answer was wrong or right. It helped a lot to have feedback within a small group.

Final Thoughts

The following outline is based on our focus group findings and provides key considerations as you progress through your 45-day journey:

1. *Know your facts.*
 - Review, study, and become familiar with the facts presented, that is, what this entire book is about! If you do not know the facts, you cannot accurately critically reason through the question.
2. *Learn how to answer questions strategically.*
 - Keep in mind that the exam questions will contain a lot of information. You will need to focus on some of the information, but other information will not be relevant to the final question being asked. Remember to read each question statement one last time before selecting your answer. Do not get tripped up on answer options that make sense for only certain parts of the question. Make sure the answer you select addresses the central theme of the question being asked.
3. *Take at least two practice exams on a computer, and remember to keep time to simulate the actual testing environment.*
 - Get used to taking practice exams while being timed. Experience what answering one question per minute feels like in an environment where you hear people typing, fidgeting in their seats, and getting up to go to the restroom. Only bring items that are allowed in the testing environment. Complete at least two practice tests in this environment. You will find it very different than taking an exam at your leisure in your pajamas while munching on a snack!
4. *At the 2009 American Occupational Therapy Association Annual Conference in Texas, the NBCOT reported that test takers who took the full 10-minute tutorials during the exam performed better than students who did not. There are two tutorials, neither of which count against your exam time. Now . . . let's get started!*

Action Steps

1. Search, locate, and download the OTPF III and review the terminology, the operationalized OT process, and all the tables presented throughout the document. Focus specifically on the definitions

and examples provided for the terminology used throughout the various areas of practice.

2. Search, locate, and download the most current version of the NBCOT® Practice Analysis. Pay special attention to the main areas of practice for primary employment, and the tables that list disorders and the percent of OT practitioners providing services in each area of practice. This will help guide your study with a better understanding of what you should focus on.
3. Search, locate, and download the most current version of the NBCOT® domain areas. Read through these and understand how the test is structured and the percentage of questions each domain covers.
4. Search, locate, and download the NBCOT® Certification Exam Handbook. Read through this to make sure you fully understand the processes and policies related to the NBCOT® examination.

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