

Ep #172: How Do You Know You're Actually Ready for NP Boards?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Anna Miller

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Welcome to the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*, the podcast for nurses who are ready to pass their boards and thrive in their careers as real deal nurse practitioners. I'm Anna, and I'm the Director of Nursing Content at Blueprint Test Prep. Whether you're deep in exam prep or stepping into practice, I've got you. It is time to become the confident, knowledgeable NP that you're meant to be. Let's dive in.

Hey, hey everyone and welcome back. I'm Anna and today I want to talk about one of the biggest questions I think we get from NP students literally every single week, if not every single day. And that question is, how do I know if I'm actually ready to take my boards?

And honestly, this is a really, really great question. Because at some point, right, every future NP, we reach this weird place where we feel like we've studied forever, but we still don't feel completely 100% ready. Maybe you are the person who has moved your exam date three times because you're nervous, or maybe you're wondering if you should just go for it. Or maybe you're graduating soon and you're just trying to figure out when you should even schedule your exam in the first place.

So today I want to walk you through how we think about readiness at SMNP Reviews. So we're going to look at what signs tell us that someone is truly prepared. And maybe just as importantly, what signs tell us they probably need a little bit more time. So let's go ahead and jump in.

Now, before we even talk about readiness, let's talk about when to take boards. One question that we get constantly is how long after graduation should I test? Now, generally speaking, we recommend taking your certification exam within the first month or two after graduation whenever possible. And why is that? Well, because everything is still fresh. You've been immersed in school, studying clinical guidelines, taking exams, and working through clinical rotations. You already have all of that momentum, and the longer you wait, the more those details from school start to fade, and many students actually find themselves needing to relearn content they already knew at graduation.

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But I want to say this, and this is really important. Timing should never override readiness. I would much rather see someone take their boards six weeks after graduation because they're prepared, more than two weeks after graduation because they felt pressured by a timeline. There is not a prize for taking your exam first. The goal is passing. So yes, we encourage testing relatively soon after graduation, but only if you have built the foundation to be successful.

Now, there's no one magic way to tell that you are ready. But the first sign that you're getting close is that you've worked through your core content review. Notice I didn't say that you've memorized every disease, because nobody does, nobody can. Boards are not expecting perfection; they're expecting safe, entry-level practice. When you're ready to test, you should be able to recognize the common diagnoses. You should know the first-line treatments. You should understand, that's very big, you need to understand, why you're choosing one medication over another. And you should recognize emergencies versus outpatient management.

If you're still opening practice questions and you're constantly thinking to yourself, "I've literally never heard of this before," that's usually a sign that you need a little bit more content review before focusing heavily on questions. And if you find yourself getting questions wrong that you did in fact know, that's a sign you just need to take a little break.

Now, one of the biggest mistakes that I see students make is thinking that practice questions are simply a way to test themselves. But they are actually one of the best learning tools that you have. By the time you're approaching boards, you've ideally completed close to 1,000 practice questions. Now, before that number scares you, remember, you don't do those in one weekend. It is something that you build over weeks and weeks of studying.

And here's something I tell students all the time. Don't obsess over how many you're getting wrong at first. Obsess over whether you're learning something from every single question. Every missed question is showing

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you exactly where your gaps are, and that's really valuable information. And if you review your rationales well, your missed questions become some of your best teachers. I hear that all the time from students in our Facebook group, that they learn so much just from reading the rationales because we put so much testable content in our question bank rationales.

All right, now here is another question that I feel like we answer a lot. And that is, what score should I be getting? So here's what we typically like to see. Toward the end of studying, not the beginning, we like to see students consistently scoring around 70% or higher on practice questions.

And notice I said consistently. Everyone has bad days. Everyone gets a random difficult question set. What we are looking for is a trend. If you're bouncing between 45%, 82%, 52%, and 79%, well, that's different than someone who's steadily scoring in the low to mid-70s over several weeks. Consistency is really what builds your confidence and is showing you that you know the material.

Now, I do have to mention, boards are long. It is a very long exam. And that's something students sometimes underestimate. Passing is not only about the knowledge, it's also about one, anxiety management, but it's also about endurance. Can you stay focused after two hours, three hours? Can you recover after missing a tough question or getting a question that you feel like you don't know the answer to? Can you keep your confidence even after you hit a difficult section?

That's why I strongly recommend taking at least one or ideally two full-length practice exams before test day. Not because they're fun, they're definitely not for most people, but because you don't want exam day to be the first time you've experienced sitting for that length of time. The more familiar the experience feels, the less intimidating it becomes, and then you're comfortable with the time limit so that you don't run out of time or have to rush through your exam.

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All right, now let's talk about another sign. This one isn't necessarily measurable, but it's real. When students first start studying, they second guess every single answer, right? They change answers repeatedly. I have been there. They overthink everything. And then something starts to happen. You begin to recognize patterns. You start being able to eliminate distractors faster.

And you notice that you're making decisions based on clinical reasoning instead of just guessing. And that's where you see a lot of growth. You're not going to suddenly wake up one morning feeling 100% ready. You likely are never going to feel 100% ready. But instead, you are gradually going to become more confident because you know that you've put in the work.

And I need to talk about something really, really important for a second. Feeling nervous or anxious does not mean you're unprepared. Almost everyone is nervous before their exam. And I have seen incredibly prepared students walk into testing centers and feel anxious. I was one of them. That is normal. The question is not, "Am I nervous?" The question is, "Have I prepared despite being nervous?" Because those are two very different things.

You need to have a plan for exam day. So know what you'll do if you hit five difficult questions in a row. Know how you'll reset if anxiety starts creeping in. Know how you'll pace yourself. Those strategies matter just as much as knowing medications or clinical guidelines.

So what if your exam day is coming up and you're still not sure? Sometimes students are right on the edge, right? They're studying, their scores are improving, but they're still wondering, "Should I move my exam?" Here is my advice. Don't make that decision based on your emotions. Make it based on evidence.

So look at your question scores, look at your trends, look at whether you've covered your content, look at whether you've completed your full-length exams. If you truly aren't ready, it's okay to give yourself another couple of

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weeks, and that's far better than rushing into an exam simply because of an arbitrary deadline.

What we don't want you to do though, is just keep pushing it off and pushing it off and pushing it off, even though you're probably ready. At SMNP reviews, this is exactly why we offer our one-on-one readiness sessions. Sometimes it's not that you need another review course or another question bank. You just need a confidence boost, and you simply need an experienced instructor to objectively look at where you are and help you decide if you're ready. Sometimes just having another set of eyes makes all the difference.

So, let's wrap everything up. You are probably getting close to board readiness if you've reviewed your major content areas, you've completed plenty of practice questions and you've learned from them, your scores are becoming consistently strong, you've practiced taking full-length exams, you're building confidence through repetition rather than perfection, you're not expected to get 100%, and you've developed a plan to manage your test day anxiety.

And generally, the more over-studying you are, the closer you are to actually being ready. And finally, just remember what we talked about at the beginning. Yes, we generally recommend taking boards within the first month or two after graduation while your knowledge is fresh. But don't let the calendar make your decision for you. Let your preparation make the decision. The goal isn't taking boards quickly. The goal is walking out knowing you gave yourself the best possible chance to pass.

If you are still studying, keep going. If you are almost there, trust the process. And if you've been waiting for someone to tell you that you don't have to be perfect, this is that reminder. You don't have to know absolutely everything. You just need to show that you are going to be a safe, competent, entry-level nurse practitioner.

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Thanks so much for listening and spending some time with me here today. If you are looking for more support, be sure to check out our review courses, our question bank, our readiness sessions, and come to our free Facebook community. We'd love to help you get across that finish line. Until next time, keep studying, keep believing in yourself, and remember, we are always rooting for you every step of the way.

Thanks for listening to another episode of the *Real Deal Nurse Practitioner Club*. If you want more information about the different types of support that we offer to students and new nurse practitioners, you can visit npreviews.com. We'll see you next week.