

# Tips on Residency Selection

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Here are tips on key elements of applying to residency and the Match process. Also check out *Strolling Through the Match*. This guidebook complements the information provided by the NRMP and ERAS.

## Application Process

- **Make sure you are using an e-mail account that will be active throughout the Match process.**

The NRMP requires that you have a working e-mail account in order to register for the Match. If you don't have an account through your medical school, sites such as Yahoo! at <http://www.yahoo.com> and Hotmail at <http://www.hotmail.com> offer free e-mail online.

- **Become familiar with the ERAS and NRMP Web sites and procedures.** Each site offers a timeline to help you plan ahead for applying to residency and the Match. ERAS Web site: <http://www.aamc.org/eras>; NRMP Web site: <http://www.nrmp.org>
- **Explore and develop your own plan of attack for completing work on your ERAS application.** Prepare a strategy that works best for you. Ideally, you want to have plenty of time to record the initial information and then make revisions as necessary.
- **Become familiar with the process of obtaining your dean's letter — also referred to the medical school performance (MSPE).** The dean's letter is a key tool that residency programs use to evaluate your overall medical school performance. Dean's letters are released to programs on November 1. Visit your dean's office and find out how the letters are prepared. Knowing this information ahead of time will help you better prepare for your responsibility: making sure that the dean's letter is accurate. Keep in touch with the dean's office to confirm that staff

has all pertinent information about you, such as awards, scholarships, extra-curricular activities, leadership roles, etc.

- Check application deadlines for the residency programs to which you are applying. Some programs may have different deadlines and it is important to know these deadlines — especially the earliest ones — to complete your ERAS application on time.

## Letters of Recommendation

- **Take initiative in asking for letters of recommendation while still on your rotations.** If you are uncertain whether your preceptor or attending is willing to write a positive letter of recommendation for residency, you should ask them directly. Take the physician aside during a break in the day and ask, *are you comfortable writing a positive letter of recommendation documenting my decision-making and clinical skills?* If the physician gives anything but a positive response, you might need to approach someone else.
- **Plan to complete requests for letters of recommendation by September 15.** Remember that your attendings are busy and will possibly need several weeks to complete and submit your letter. With many residency programs having application deadlines in the fall, setting September 15 as a mental deadline will assure that your letter writers have an adequate amount of time to submit your letter.

## CV and Personal Statement

- **Give yourself plenty of time to write your personal statement.** Take some quiet moments to think about the experiences in your life that have shaped you as a person. *What made you decide to go into medicine? What are your personal strengths? What will make you a good*

*resident?* Contemplating the answers to these kinds of questions ahead of time will make it easier to write your personal statement.

- **Make your personal statement unique.** Your personal statement should reflect your individuality. Remember, the people who will be reviewing your credentials have read and are reading hundreds of personal statements. Do something to make yours stand out in their minds. Don't be afraid to show your pride in your accomplishments.
- **Use good writing skills.** Write in full sentences. Avoid abbreviations and jargon. Use a dictionary and spell check.
- **Ask trusted advisors, mentors and friends to critique your personal statement and CV.** It is essential to make these documents as flawless as possible. Ask your evaluators to look for spelling and grammatical errors as well as assessing the overall impression these documents create. This will ensure that your credentials are error-free, easy to read, and effective.
- **Scrutinize your CV and personal statement from an ethical standpoint.** Naturally, you want to present yourself in the best possible light to residency directors. When working on your CV and personal statement, pay close attention to the accuracy and clarity of the information. *Is it possible that a reader could misinterpret the nature of your experience because of your use of vague references or flowery language? Have you adequately described your degree of involvement in a particular project or activity? Have you given sufficient credit to others working with you?* Also use caution when listing published works in a CV or personal statement. You should only include those papers and articles that are readily available for review. Don't cite works in progress or papers not yet accepted for publication.

### Researching Residencies

- **Gather information about residency programs.** Even if you are unsure of your specialty choice,

it is a good idea to begin collecting residency information early in your third year. Take advantage of the Fellowship and Residency Electronic Interactive Database (FREIDA) maintained by the AMA. It allows you to search for residency programs by specialty and to research workforce information about each specialty. Check out the Web sites of residencies. If you are interested in more than one specialty, request information from residency programs in each of the specialties of interest. Obtain information from a wide variety of programs within one specialty (urban vs. rural, community-based vs. university-based, etc.). It will give you a better sense of how programs in the same specialty can often be very different.

- **Have a game plan for scrutinizing residency options.** As you review program materials, pay close attention to the nature and length of training, what the training prepares a resident to do, the availability of residency positions, and the institutional and geographic differences between training programs within the same specialty.
- **Ask fourth-year students for advice about the Match.** Here are some possible questions to ask: *What do you know now that you wish you'd known at the beginning of the process? What is the most important thing you have learned from the whole experience? What advice would you give to someone who is considering the same specialty? How did you narrow your specialties/residency programs? If you had to do it all over again, what would you do differently?*
- **If you have chosen a specialty, start defining your most important criteria for residency.** This process can be as simple as making a list of your top priorities for residency or doing a "must" vs. "want" analysis. Consider what you "must" have out of a residency — for family, personal or other reasons — and then brainstorm about the "wants" you may have after the critical needs are met. With a working list of priorities, you will have something to come back to when it is time to start making decisions about where to apply.



Think about issues such as geographic location, curriculum, academic reputation, etc., when developing your criteria.

- **Seek out your specialty's department chair at your school or a trusted mentor from the specialty for additional advice on residency programs.** The department chair of your specialty of interest is likely to be one of your best resources to learn more about the merits of residency programs in your state and across the region. Also visit with a variety of university and community-based physicians in the specialty. Counsel from physicians who attended different residencies can help you understand similarities and differences inherent in that specialty's residency programs.
- **Begin to compare and contrast key characteristics of selected residencies.** Before you set out on residency interviews, be sure to identify the key factors that are likely to influence the type and quality of your training. Here are a few questions to consider:
  1. **How will the location of the residency program enhance your learning opportunity?** The residency location you choose – whether it's urban, rural, inner city or suburban – will provide you with a unique learning experience.
  2. **What degree of exposure will you have to residents of other specialties?** Ideally, you want to understand and appreciate the presence or lack of other specialties within your training institution. There are both advantages and disadvantages to having other specialty residents within your institution.
  3. **What is the faculty to resident ratio during patient care hours?** The total number of faculty (physician and otherwise) together with the ratio of faculty to residents indicates the structure of the teaching environment.

## Interviewing

- **Explore strategies for scheduling your interviews.** Once interview offers start coming in, you will have the task of scheduling them in a way that is not only time efficient, but also doesn't wear you down to the point of exhaustion or burnout. Here are some tips to keep in mind when:
  1. **Schedule one or two interviews before visiting with your top program(s).** If possible, try to first schedule interviews at programs of lesser interest as "practice runs." Your interviewing skills should improve with each interview so that by the time you interview with your most-desired programs, you will be a pro!
  2. **Avoid putting off scheduling interviews at less desirable programs while waiting for your most desired programs to call.** Delaying the scheduling of an interview at a less desirable program could appear unprofessional to the residency directors.
  3. **Avoid scheduling more than three interviews in one week.** One to three interviews per week is a good guideline to follow. Ideally, you should plan to arrive a full day beforehand to get acclimated to the community as well as the training institution. Also, remember that you want to stay as fresh as possible for your interviews. More than three interviews in seven days will leave you exhausted from traveling and, more than likely, foggy about the details of each program.
- **Secure time off for interviews promptly.** As soon as you are aware of your interview schedule, you need to get that time off. Let the supervising physician on your rotation know when you will be gone and for how long. It's a good idea to reconcile your actual days away with the call schedule to avoid missing call due to traveling time. Once approved, tell the other members of your ward team when you will be gone. This practice is professional on your part and will give your team plenty of time to cover for the time you will be gone.

- **Know your interviewers before the interview.** Phone the residency and ask who will be interviewing you. Gather background information on these individuals. Browse the program's Web site. Read some research papers or articles your interviewers have published. Knowing a variety of information about your interviewers will not only give you material for small talk, it will impress your interviewers that you are well prepared and organized.
- **Be prepared for any type of interview format.** No two programs interview alike. You may find yourself one-on-one with the director of the program or in the middle of a "parade of stars," answering questions from several residents at one time. You must be able to keep your cool in these situations and truly shine. Ask current residents and others who interviewed at the program about their experiences.
- **Start preparing for the questions residency programs are bound to ask.** Some of the questions include: *Why did you choose this specialty? Why did you choose to apply to this residency? What are your overall career goals? Describe a particularly meaningful experience during your medical training. Why was it meaningful?* A more extensive list of sample questions appears in [Strolling Through the Match](#).
- **Create a working list of questions to ask residency directors and current residents during your interviews.** During a residency visit, you are likely to have the opportunity to "interview" the program director and/or faculty as well as some of the residents. Be prepared with questions tailored for this group. Keep in mind that the program director and faculty can give you keen insight into the program specifics and academic environment, while residents are a valuable resource for lifestyle issues associated with residency as well as the nuts and bolts of the life of a resident. Some examples of questions for the program director include: *What paths have your recent graduates taken after residency? What do*

*you feel are the greatest strengths/weaknesses of your program? How and how often is feedback given to your residents? Does your program participate in any community service programs? Are rotations done at other hospitals?* Some examples of questions for residents and house staff include: *What factor(s) made you decide to come to this program? What do you feel are the greatest strengths/weaknesses of your program? What is a typical day/week/month/year like for first-, second- and third-year residents? What do you and/or other residents do for fun?*

- **Develop strategies for responding to illegal questions.** Interviewers are prohibited by federal law from asking questions about a person's sex, age, race, national origin or family planning/marital status. Yet the likelihood that you will be asked an illegal or improper question is relatively high. Inexperienced interviewers are often (although not always) the source of these questions and may not realize they are breaking the law. They may be trying to find out more about your work style, values or even just making light conversation. Regardless of the reason behind the question, you are within your rights to decline answering them. If, however, the thought of withholding information from the interviewer makes you feel uncomfortable, the following response model will help you stay focused on sharing comments that really matter.

Interviewer: "What are your family plans while in residency?"

YOU: *Determine the probable INTENT behind this question. Consider, for example, the broader context of the conversation and the tone of voice and body language of the interviewer.*

Interviewer's INTENT: "How committed are you to your career?"

YOU: *Frame your response in a way that addresses the INTENT but not the actual question.*

Your Response: *“I have always highly valued my career and family both. However, my family has never interfered with my ability to perform my job.”*

Role-playing such scenarios is one effective way to bolster your confidence should you find yourself in this type of situation.

- **Make a positive, lasting impression during your residency interviews.** As much as the program is evaluating your academic and clinical achievements, your interviewers will also be looking at you and determining how well you “fit” into the team. So be yourself!
- **Develop a post-interview self-evaluation tool.** Strengthen your interview skills by taking stock of your performance after each interview. Identify those elements of the interview that went well and those that didn’t go as well as you would have liked. Try to identify those factors that contributed to a strong or weak performance: *What types of questions did you answer well? What types of questions gave you trouble? Were you relaxed and in control throughout the interview? Did you feel you talked too much/too little? Why? Did you feel you had adequate knowledge about the program before the interview? Had you done your “homework” on the program? How would you rate your nonverbal communication?*
- **Check your e-mail while traveling.** Regularly checking your e-mail is vital during interview season, as it is often your primary means of communication with residency programs. Stay connected, regardless of where you travel.
- **Continue to improve your interview skills.** If it’s clear that certain types of questions are stumping you, role-playing is an extremely helpful exercise. Have a friend or advisor – someone who can be an objective observer – pose as your interviewer. Also, evaluate your performance as an interviewer. Did you come away from the interview with sufficient information? If not, you may want to

rethink what you are asking the residency director, faculty and current residents.

- **Send a thank you note to the program immediately after your interview.** Well-timed follow-up will be appreciated by the residency program and will be useful in conveying your continued interest in the program. You may also want to send notes to particularly helpful individuals. Although your primary communication with the program will be electronic, an old-fashioned handwritten note will convey more thoughtfulness.
- **Take advantage of second looks, if given the opportunity.** Most second looks at residency programs are on an invitation basis. They tend to be more informal than actual interviews and may involve events in more social settings. Ask if you can bring family or loved ones to the events as well, as this will give them a chance to share how they feel about the program and community in general. However, in the midst of this more relaxed environment, don’t forget that you are still in the interviewing phase and that the program may still be sizing you up as much as you are assessing them.
- **Refine your evaluation process.** Once you have several interviews under your belt, it’s time to begin to seriously scrutinize each program. To do this effectively, you need to have a definite system of evaluation. Here are some suggestions to ensure that you collect and analyze the material needed to make informed decisions.
  1. **Don’t overlook the obvious.** Start by reviewing your career goals and what you value most; then reexamine the criteria you used to select certain residency programs in the first place. *What are the key factors that caused you to rate a program high initially? Now that you’ve actually interviewed the program, have these ratings changed?*

2. **Collect both qualitative and quantitative information.** Create an evaluation tool that allows you to record important facts and personal impressions as well as assign rankings to key factors (e.g., curriculum, faculty, facilities, benefits, etc.).
3. **Be willing to try different types of evaluation tools and exercises.** If you find that your initial evaluation methods are too complex or confusing, find ways to simplify the process, such as a single grid with columns labeled “strengths,” “weaknesses” and “questions.”
4. Revisit earlier program evaluations. As you continue the interview process, review your notes from earlier interviews. You may find that you ranked these programs either too high or too low as you gain a broader perspective. Feel free to make adjustments in these earlier rankings. It is important that these evaluations reflect your true opinion of each program and provide accurate comparisons.

### Ranking Process

- **Develop a residency ranking tool for your entire family.** Your sense of well being during residency will largely depend on your family’s/ loved ones’ happiness. Before you compile your Rank Order List (ROL), take time with your family to develop a process by which everybody can submit their own ROL. Take into account:
  1. **Location** — What does your family like or dislike about the geographic location of each program? Are there opportunities for everyone to pursue their own interests?
  2. **Community** — What are your family’s thoughts on the community, including schools, social environment, housing, etc.?
  3. **Employment** — What is the job market like in the community? Are there plenty of jobs in your spouse’s/significant other’s area of interest?
  4. **Cost** — How much more/less expensive will it be to live with your family in this community

(compared to medical school)? Is the additional/less cost worth it?

5. **“X-factor”** — Will everyone be truly happy living here for the next three to five years?
- **If you are a couple entering the Match, consider your partner’s need.** The following topics should be explored by both of you before you begin to formulate your Rank Order List.
    1. **Matching to the same program** — If you are both interested in the same specialty at the same program, give careful consideration to the pros and cons of such an arrangement. Keep in mind, for example, that your options for seeing each other outside the hospital and taking time off together will be limited. Your call schedules are also likely to present unique challenges. An alternative would be to interview at multiple programs in the same geographic area and both of you try to Match to that region.
    2. **Ranking programs** — Although you will be interviewing separately, the ultimate job of assembling your ROL will need to be a collaboration. One idea is to assemble separate lists first and then decide which “pairs” of programs you will rank together as a couple. This will require a great deal of open communication (as well as assessing your priorities as a couple), so carve out time in your schedule to discuss this.
    3. **Other implications** — Check with the NRMP for specific information on the Couples Match process at [http://www.nrmp.org/res\\_match/special\\_part/us\\_seniors/couples.html](http://www.nrmp.org/res_match/special_part/us_seniors/couples.html). Your dean’s office can be another resource. Also remember that if one partner withdraws from the Match for any reason, the remaining partner will be matched independently. However, as a couple, you remain as a single “unit” in the Match. If the two of you do not successfully Match into a pair of programs, the algorithm will not run you both back through independently. *It’s all or nothing as a couple in the Match.*

- **Start creating a draft of your Rank Order List.** As your interviews wrap up, begin deciding how you want to rank each program. Rank programs honestly in order of your preference. The bottom line is that you and your family are happy – wherever you end up. Therefore, you want to rank all programs you would be content training at. Even if you loved the program, but don't think you will get in, go ahead and rank it high on your list. The NRMP Matching algorithm will initially attempt to place an applicant into the program that is listed highest on the applicant's Rank Order List. If you don't list your most preferred programs at the top of your list, you may miss out on the opportunity to Match into the best training program for you. However, if any program you interviewed with will not make you happy, then do not rank it.
- **Don't be afraid to request additional information or seek clarification from residency programs.** More than likely, you've thought of at least one or two questions that you should have asked during the interview process. In going over your notes, you may discover that you need more information about a particular policy or benefit. Use this as an opportunity to continue dialogue with your residency contacts and to reiterate your interest in the program.
- **Nurture relationships with your recommending attendings.** If you have any time off, make a point to visit the attendings who wrote your letters of recommendation and update them on your interview process. This is a great opportunity to share thoughts or feelings you have about the programs and to seek their advice on compiling your Rank Order List. The attendings may have valuable insight. Additionally, if they are well connected to programs, this could be an opportunity for them to put in a good word for you at a particular program. Nurture these relationships as the Match draws near.
- **Hold regular family meetings to discuss residencies and the ranking process.**

Family meetings are extremely beneficial so that everybody feels involved and a part of the decision-making process. Family meetings can be as simple as talking around the dinner table or more structured with time set aside specifically for the purpose of family communication. Take advantage of this time to discuss residencies that you want to rank highly on your list. Solicit additional feedback from your family on these programs. Develop a tiebreaker system for your Rank Order List. It is important that you have a plan in place to choose among two or more programs that may be equally appealing. Decide upon the three to five aspects of residency that are the most important to you and your family, no matter what. Use these areas to serve as your tiebreaker categories for ranking your programs if all other categories are evenly matched.

- **Plan for the possibility of Scrambling.** Make a list of programs to which you would be interested in Scrambling before the Match. Many students make the mistake of trying to Scramble to a program that they know nothing about. Do your homework ahead of time. Use a resource such as the AAFP's [Directory of Family Medicine Residency Programs](http://www.aafp.org/residencies) (<http://www.aafp.org/residencies>) to become familiar with programs across the country. Assemble a list of several programs for the Scramble in the event you do not Match. Seek advice from your dean's office or your advisor on what materials you need to have ready in the event you do not Match.

## The Match

### If you don't Match

- Consider the possibility of Scrambling to a program that you have already interviewed. Given the Match algorithm's complexities, if you do not Match, the first programs you may want to explore are those you interviewed who have openings. More than likely they will still have your application materials on file, and you will already know a great deal about the program. Obviously, if you didn't like the

program, you should probably not consider Matching to it; however, if you did like the program, then this is definitely a first step to take in the Scramble process.

- **Attach contact numbers to all correspondence with programs.** During the Scramble, be sure to include your personal phone or pager number that will be free and accessible during Match week.
- **Explore other interests and training opportunities.** If you do not Match and are not ready to settle for second best, this may be one of the best times to pursue other options. For example, you may want to pursue the advanced degree you've always talked about. Common areas of study include public health, business, education or law. This may also be a good time to pursue interests in such areas as health policy, research and international medicine. Using this time wisely may serve to increase your chances of getting the position you want next year.

#### Once you have Matched

- **Contact your residency program and let your excitement be known.** You can use this opportunity to ask about other aspects of residency, such as orientation week and other upcoming activities. Program directors, coordinators or even current residents may be able to provide you with helpful insight on housing options, including any current residents who are looking for roommates or have leases coming due that you might assume.
- **Thank your mentors and advisors for their help and support throughout the residency process.** They counseled you, edited your application materials, made phone calls for you and provided support and encouragement. Convey your appreciation.

- **Discuss with your family the next steps in preparing for residency.** One of the first things to consider is where you will live. You will want to explore the advantages and disadvantages of renting an apartment versus buying a home. Other aspects of your new living arrangements to think about include:

1. **Location/commute time** — How far from your training institution do you want to live? Commute time should be a consideration since most of your time will be spent at the hospital.
2. **Surrounding neighborhood/noise level** — Sleep will be a precious commodity during residency and living in a quiet neighborhood may hold more advantages than you realize. When looking at homes or apartments, pay attention to whether the neighborhood is near an airport, railroad tracks or busy intersections. Pay attention to details such as whether an apartment is a top or bottom unit (top-story units are usually quieter than lower level units).

- **Volunteer to mentor underclassmen on the Match process or give a presentation based on your insight on the Match.** Now that the Match is over, reflect on your experience. Ask yourself if there is anything you learned or experienced that you would have liked to know beforehand. Take this insight and find avenues that allow you to share it with others who have yet to go through the Match.