

## Acing the Interview



The residency interview is a critical piece of the application process - it's where all your efforts and preparation have been leading and it's finally your chance to see how compatible the program is with your goals and expectations. It's also their chance to gauge how well you'll fit in their program. Your first impression, how you answer common questions, and the questions you ask your interviewers will all help you make the most of this opportunity.

### First Impressions

Know where you're going and arrive early. Arriving a few minutes early shows you're prepared and organized. Nothing's more stressful than trying to find parking or getting lost on the way to an interview. Inquire about parking or other transportation in advance and if possible, make a trial run.

You may have the opportunity to go to dinner or lunch with residents or attend a reception before your formal interview. Alcohol may be offered at any of these functions and you should imbibe in moderation or not at all.

You will probably be nervous and that's to be expected. Look your interviewers in the eye, greet them by name, smile and offer your hand for a firm handshake. Be polite to everyone - you never know who has a say in this process and you will get better information if you are friendly and open.

### Frequently Asked Questions

There are a number fairly common questions including why you chose the specialty, why you applied to the program, your strengths and weaknesses, what you are looking for in a program, an interesting case you were involved in, etc. There's a list of [frequently asked interview questions](#) to practice with. If you can answer most of the ones on this list effectively, you should be well prepared for your interviews. Make sure you keep answers brief and to the point and be consistent - from question to question and from interviewer to interviewer. Enthusiasm is frequently half the battle - stay upbeat and positive.

A common stumbling block for many students is also one of the most common questions -- "Tell me about yourself". Your answer should have a medical and specialty focus, be about one or two minutes long, and should let your personality shine. Make sure you prepare a statement, as students caught off guard with this question tend to ramble on or sound disorganized.

### Your Turn: Questions to Ask

Keep in mind that you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you. Your goal is to broaden and deepen your knowledge of the program to assess how compatible you are. You're seeking a program that'll live up to your expectations and assist you in meeting your professional goals, so you'll need to put some thought into what types of questions you want to ask your interviewers. Everyone has different priorities and ideas about what they want in a program, so you should make a list beforehand of the types of information you want that'll help you make your decision. Almost every interviewer will ask you what questions you have for them so be prepared with many thoughtful questions.

Don't ask about salary, benefits, vacation and competition, even though they're important questions to you. This information can usually be found in the materials they provide and you don't want them to think you are only concerned with the fringe benefits rather than the educational experience. Keep in mind that nothing is off the record. Even when you are talking informally with residents make sure

you are careful about what you ask. You don't want to be the candidate who told the housestaff that they are "looking for the most cushy program possible."

### Handling Difficult Questions

Try to anticipate areas of concern and devise plans to overcome them. Don't be surprised if something doesn't go as planned or if you're posed a difficult question. For example, be prepared to openly discuss a disappointing semester, grade, or having to re-take the USMLE Step 1. Your answers to questions about those experiences should be open and non-defensive.

Tips for Handling Difficult Questions:

- Brainstorm a list of possible questions you may be asked.
- Concentrate on areas that worry you most, and solicit help in preparing responses.
- Think before responding; there's nothing wrong with pausing briefly first.
- Be brief and respond in a factual way. Don't give more information than is necessary.
- Ask the interviewer to restate the question if you don't understand it. Try to determine what information the interviewer seeks.
- Never fabricate or overstate information.
- Anticipate difficult questions, prepare responses in advance, and rehearse.

Not all of the people you interview with will be skilled at conducting interviews. The law prohibits some types of questions that you're not obligated to answer. Restrictions exist to prevent employers from unfairly eliminating you from consideration. Most illegal questions fall into four broad categories: disabilities and physical skills; personal history; race, ethnicity, or creed; and family and relationship issues. How you handle these types of questions is a personal decision.

First, remember that, in general, these questions are more ignorant than malicious. There is a fine line between questions that are illegal and those that are simply inept, curious, or friendly. Don't approach these questions in a hostile manner. You should consider carefully whether or not you want to answer. Refusing to answer may reduce your opportunity to make a positive impression. A better option may be to smile, remain pleasant, and answer the question, focusing your comments (for example, for women, on family plans) on the seriousness of your commitment to your training. Some version of "I'm pleased with the job I've done thus far balancing my personal and professional life. There shouldn't be a problem with it in the future" should suffice.

### After the Interview

As soon as you can, write down all your impressions of the program. After you have gone on a few interviews, everything and everyone will start looking and sounding alike, so it's best to capture this information as soon as possible. You may not remember much later. The [Residency Program Evaluation Guide](#) may be helpful in recording your impressions. Fill one out for each interview so you have a good basis for comparison when the time comes to prepare your rank order list.

Send a personalized thank you letter or note to the program director. Handwritten notes are always nice but email is usually fine as well. Emphasize the points about the residency and site that were particularly appealing, and restate how your background and/or personal qualities make you a good match for the program. You should tell them of your continued interest and enthusiasm for the program.

### Make the Most of Your Interviews

You should be relieved to know that most residency interviews are pleasant experiences. They want you to learn about them as much as they want to learn about you. A compatible match is in everyone's best interests so you shouldn't encounter too many adversarial interviews. Most students who interview poorly, do so because of the following:

- Inadequate preparation
- Not providing appropriate or consistent answers to the questions asked
- Showing a discouraging, condescending, abrasive or evasive mood
- Seeming flat, nervous or uninterested
- Using inappropriate humor
- Making disparaging remarks about other people or programs
- Rambling on and incoherent answers

The interview process, while grueling, is an important part of making a good decision about your residency training. Sell yourself, be confident (not cocky), and make the most of this opportunity.

Next up is [Going through the Match](#).

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