

Overview: Interviewing for residency

Adapted from the AAMC

The role of the interview in the residency application process

The residency application process is all about evaluation. Your overarching goal of this process is to find the best match between you and a program, and the residency interview is a critical piece. The residency interview is where your education, experiences, specialty exploration, self-discovery, and other preparation have led.

Interviews are programs' best opportunity to gauge how well you fit with their program and whether you can be successful in it. But it's every bit as important you interview the programs too, as interviews are your best opportunity to see how compatible each program is with your goals and expectations. After all, one of these programs is where you'll potentially spend the next several years of your life. Your goal is to walk away from the interview trail confident in your knowledge of how happy and successful you'd be at each program, so you can submit the best possible rank order list for the match.

The experience

You should be relieved to know that most residency interviews are pleasant experiences. Programs want you to learn about them as much as they want to learn about you. Since a compatible match is in everyone's best interest, you should encounter few to no adversarial interviews.

Poorly executed interviews, on the other hand, do occur. Most students who interview poorly, do so because of

- preparing inadequately,
- providing inappropriate or inconsistent answers to the questions asked,
- displaying a discouraging, condescending, abrasive, or evasive mood,
- seeming flat, nervous, or uninterested,
- using inappropriate humor,
- saying disparaging remarks about other people or programs, or
- rambling on or otherwise providing incoherent answers.

Aim to sell yourself, be confident (not cocky), and maximize this opportunity.

Timeline

Once you send your application and supporting materials to your chosen programs, the interview process begins. Residency interviews usually occur October through January of your fourth year, with December and January being the busiest interview months.

Programs may begin contacting you for interviews as early as October or as late as December—the timing varies by specialty and program. Some specialties generally offer interviews earlier than others. And some programs wait until all application materials and letters of recommendation are received, including the Medical Student Performance Evaluation (MSPE, formerly called the Dean's Letter), released on October 1.

Try to interview in October, November, and December if you plan to participate in [early matches](#) and in November, December, and January if you plan to participate in the [National Residency Match Program®](#) (NRMP®) (a.k.a., the main residency Match). Most program directors prefer to finish interviewing by the end of January to prepare for match deadlines.

Visit length and format

Most residency interview visits are lengthy compared to other job interviews. Expect an interview to last a minimum of half a day, but in many cases, it lasts longer. While no one format exists, generally anticipate you'll tour the facility(ies) as well as interview with the program director, two or three faculty members, and one or two residents.

You might also attend rounds or eat lunch with faculty or residents. Often, programs host a reception for all interviewees the night before the official interview day.

Programs usually send interviewees a schedule for the interview. This way, you can preview the experience and make further arrangements if the schedule lacks insight into a particular aspect of the program you'd like to see (e.g., rounds or morning meetings).

Because of the length of residency interviews, you're required to be "on" for long periods. As such, the interview trail can be grueling. Ensure you schedule interviews so you'll have plenty of energy to make a good impression and plenty of time to learn as much as you would like about each program.

Be an interview all-star

Interview season is well under way, and few things are more important to successfully matching than your interview performance. In fact, according to the [Results of the 2016 NRMP® Program Director Survey](#), the brief hours you spend interviewing will significantly impact whether you'll be ranked by a program. Interpersonal skills, professional attributes exhibited in the interview, and interactions with faculty were cited by program directors as highest in importance among criteria for ranking applicants. Rated more important than clerkship grades and board scores for ranking applicants, the interview can make or break your candidacy with a program.

So how do you shine during an interview? Assuming you've already learned as much as possible about the program and the people with whom you're interviewing, follow these tips:

Be cordial and respectful to everyone. This should go without saying: The whole experience is an interview. Even casual interactions with the department secretary and your initial conversation with the residency coordinator may be considered when you're evaluated for a position.

Residents also provide input about candidates and often serve on selection committees. Opportunities to socialize, meet, and interview with current residents may be more laid-back than interviews with faculty, but don't be tempted to treat residents as peers, or share information and stories you wouldn't otherwise reveal to faculty interviewers.

Prepare to answer common questions. "Tell me about yourself" and "Why do you want to go into this specialty?" are standard questions. It's more likely you'll impress interviewers if thoughtful, insightful, and concise responses roll off your tongue. And expect to answer some questions multiple times during the interview day. Common interview questions address your plans for the future, why you chose the program, and what you'll bring to the program if selected.

Also prepare to discuss a patient care problem or challenge and how you handled it, and the most interesting case you experienced during your rotations. Some introspection in advance will go a long way, and you'll be well prepared for most questions.

Don't be distracted by bad interviewers. You might interview with as many as eight or more people in a program, and their interview styles and skills may differ greatly. Some interviews will be conversational with no grilling involved; others will be formal with questions designed to test your grace under pressure. Regardless of the interviewer's skill, stay focused on the question or topic at hand and try to emphasize the qualifications that will make you an asset to their program.

Ask thoughtful questions. Most interviewers will ask if you have any questions for them. This is your opportunity to evaluate the program and its fit with your educational and professional goals. Don't ask about benefits, salary, time-off, or call schedules. Most answers to these questions will be provided in advance through information packets or the program's website. Interviewers will likely view you less favorably if it seems you're only interested in what the program can offer you and you ask questions that already have been answered.

Instead, develop lists of questions to help you assess the program. Learning opportunities, feedback, research, teaching responsibilities, and evaluation are good topics to consider as you start formulating your questions. And ensure you're directing your questions to the appropriate audience (i.e., the program director, faculty member, or resident). Review [*Don't Forget to Ask: Advice from Residents on What to Ask During the Residency Interview*](#), developed by the AAMC's Organization of Resident Representatives, to help frame your questions.

Present a positive attitude. Interviewers seek enthusiasm (for your specialty and their program), maturity, professionalism, and team players in their residents. They also prefer residents who communicate and articulate well. Interviewers expect some nervousness, but good preparation can help calm nerves. You'll torpedo your candidacy if you are over confident or cocky or bash other programs or specialties.

Follow up. Opinions differ on the necessity of thank-you notes, but personalized, well-written, and timely thanks to your interviewers can only help your candidacy. Thank them for taking time to interview you, and highlight the program's strengths that impressed you. For a program with numerous interviewers, a thank-you note to the program director may suffice. There's also debate about format: while hand-written is clearly most impressive, e-mail is also acceptable. Content is more important than format.

If you're less than confident about your interviewing skills, ask if your school offers mock interviews. Use them and similar opportunities to receive feedback and pinpoint your weak areas.

What (not) to wear

A residency interview is a job interview, and you should dress accordingly. Dress should always be conservative, tasteful, and neat. You should also feel comfortable and confident in the clothes and shoes you choose to wear. Fidgeting because your shoes pinch or shirt button tends to unlatch not only affects your performance, but also can distract your interviewers. You want the appearance of a successful, mature physician — not a medical student.

Men and women should wear a suit, preferably in dark, classic colors (commonly navy, gray, or black) and a long-sleeved shirt or blouse (white or light-colored). Use common sense, good grooming, and moderation in all things. You can express your fashion sense and uniqueness within the business dress code outlined above, but do so with caution. The more you deviate from what's considered conservative and universally acceptable, the more likely interviewers might remember you for the worse. Interviewers should be impressed by your credentials — not distracted by your appearance.

You might also want a briefcase or portfolio for carrying hard copies of your CV, personal statement, transcripts, maps or directions, interview itinerary, correspondence, and notes as well as a notepad and other relevant papers. This accessory should also convey a professional demeanor. Plan to leave your backpack in your hotel room. Consider borrowing from a friend or relative if you prefer to avoid a new purchase.

Polishing your digital image

The New York Times covered it. So did CNN, CBS News, and Time magazine. The headlines were all variations on a theme: Medical students post unprofessional content online.

The attention over medical students' unprofessional online behavior was sparked by a [study conducted by faculty at George Washington University in Washington, and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore](#), and published in the September 23/30, 2009 edition of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. The researchers surveyed 130 medical schools and found, of the 78 who responded, 60% of the schools reported incidents of their students posting unprofessional content online. The incidents included

- postings that violated patient confidentiality (13% of schools)
- postings containing profanity (52% of schools)
- postings containing discriminatory language (48% of schools)
- depictions and photos of intoxication (39% of schools)
- sexually suggestive material (38% of schools)

Few of the incidents violated patient confidentiality. Rather, most of the incidents were potentially detrimental to the student's career. The possibility a program director is searching residency candidates online and finding their unprofessional content should give every student pause.

Entering the medical profession requires you wear the mantle of professionalism at all times, and your digital image is no exception. As we enter residency interview season, it's in your best interest to examine whether your digital image projects the professional you're training to be.

There are no overarching guidelines for medical students (or physicians) that define (un)professional online behavior. But in the wake of the JAMA article, many schools are drafting policies so check with your school for any applicable guidance.

Defining appropriate online conduct can be blurry regardless of whether your school has a policy in place. So how can you ensure future program directors find only the best "you" online?

Consider carefully what you're posting. Participating in networking and sharing sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Flickr, and Twitter or writing a blog are wonderful tools for connecting with friends, family, and even colleagues. But pages laced with profanity, critiques of your school or hospital, or depictions of drunken weekend escapades are a no-no.

Avoid posting patient stories. Even without names, there's often enough identifying information in a blog entry, wall post, or other anecdote to identify a patient. If you do discuss patient encounters, change all identifying details (e.g., dates, times, conditions, sex, age) of any training tales you choose to share.

Periodically search yourself. What others post on your page can also reflect poorly on you. So be vigilant about checking others' posts for offensive or otherwise inappropriate elements.

Also, enter your name into a search engine and see what surfaces and whether it's positive. Remove unprofessional posts, and monitor your profile going forward.

Check the photos in which you're "tagged." Ensure they're appropriate, and un-tag yourself from any embarrassing or unprofessional photos. Better yet, skip tagging photos altogether.

Define funny. Humor can be hard to interpret when conveyed in writing. And what you consider as a funny, harmless anecdote or sarcastic comment may be understood differently by others.

Choose your friends carefully. Avoid online interactions with patients, and carefully consider "friending" residents, faculty, and colleagues. Depending on how you utilize your online network, it may be inappropriate to include in your personal web sphere people who may supervise your work.

Restrict your privacy settings. You could block potential supervisors and the general public from certain content, but don't rely on that alone! Privacy settings can help you continue enjoying your online connections, but those setting options can be changed by site owners without your prior knowledge. In which case, aspects of your profile or other content you've restricted may suddenly be available for all eyes to see.

Last, remember two critical points: 1) you have no control over what's forwarded by others, and most importantly, 2) what's on the web can live forever.