The Interview

Report on time and dress appropriately.

Prepare a list of questions before your interview. Be prepared to ask and answer questions indicating what you can contribute that other candidates may not. Be prepared to “sell yourself.” Why should they take you and not someone else? Be sincere. Do not be inappropriately informal.

Avoid asking questions about things covered in written material you have already received from the program.

Send a follow up letter.

Know what are appropriate questions to ask house staff vs. faculty interviews (i.e., don’t ask your faculty interviewer about the call schedule).

Advice from Peers

“In medicine they tell us to look for horses not zebras... on the interview trail, common questions are common.” Truer words haven’t been spoken. Doesn’t it seem obvious to you that you’ll be asked to describe yourself, why you want to go into the field you’re applying for, if you can present an interesting case, to describe some activity that you did ten years ago that appears on your CV, why a program should hire you, and so on? You should prepare for these questions in advance. It’s astonishing how many students forget to do this!

Try to rehearse your responses to these questions as much as possible. Your ability to interview well gets better with more practice. Rehearse with your friends and with family members. Be able to provide these answers smoothly, without any hesitation. You are expected to be able to explain any part of your application in a manner that is readily understood by an intelligent layperson who may not be familiar with the medical field. Keep your responses concise and focused on the question being asked. Limit your answers to no more than a few sentences, as you might run the risk of losing the interviewer’s attention. When you are being interviewed, sit forward in your chair; this gives you a more “engaging” appearance than if you were to lean back in your chair during the interview.

Remember that, for the most part, interviewers are very nice. You should be very relaxed during your interviews. Even though you are trying to sell yourself to a program, realize that the program is also trying to sell itself to you. When you introduce yourself to the interviewer, make eye contact, smile, and give a firm handshake. When giving affirmative responses to your interviewer, refrain from using such wishy-washy words as “yeah”. Instead, say “yes,” “absolutely,” and “definitely.” If they ask you how you are doing, say “I’m excited to be here interviewing at your program today,” instead of, “I’m fine.”

Program directors and their representatives (a.k.a. the interviewers) want to know why you are interested in their program. Be prepared to tell them why. Prior to every interview, you should always review any brochures about the program that are either mailed
to you or downloadable from the program’s website. When you look these materials over, make notes about the strengths of the program. Then, when you prepare your answer, talk about what you are generally looking for in a training program, as well as the attributes that their program has which make it a good fit for you. Additionally, mention that their program was highly recommended to you by your advisors; program directors always want to feel that their training program is respected by other schools.

One question that you will most likely get at the end of your interview—and sometimes at the very beginning of your interview, and probably 20 other times during your interview day—is, “What questions do you have about our program?” In answering questions like these, there are a few ground rules to keep in mind. First, remember that there are certain questions that are appropriate to ask an attending or a department chairman, and there are certain questions that are appropriate to ask a resident. Do not make the mistake of asking your interviewer a question that should be directed to a resident. (Such questions include inquiries about salary, vacation time, call schedule, etc.) Also, remember that certain questions directed to a program director are fair game. These include questions about the board pass rate, any residents that left the program and why, the accreditation status of the program, the anticipated changes to the program over the next several years, research opportunities and funding available to residents, what percentage of grads go on to fellowship and what fellowships graduates have been accepted to, where do graduates generally go on to practice, anticipated changes to the department over the next several years, etc.

A second ground rule is that you should not ask questions that you can easily look up in the program’s brochure (which you should have already reviewed). If you have exhausted your “supply” of questions on previous interviewers, feel free to reuse some of your questions—even if you already know the answers to them—so that you still “appear” to be interested. Also, try to frame questions that highlight your previous accomplishments. For example, if you previously performed research, you can ask, “During medical school, I was involved in several research projects which ultimately matured into several publications, and I was wondering about what research opportunities would be available to me as a resident in your program?”

A third ground rule is that if you are interviewing at an academic institution, don’t ask about private practice opportunities for graduating residents. Remember that the major goal of most academic training programs is to train an academically well-rounded physician, not a private practitioner.

During each interview day, you will have an opportunity to speak with several residents. Be very careful about what you say around them. Though residents may not sit on the selection committee and formally rank applicants, they still provide feedback to the program director. Remember that you are applying to become a resident. The residents you will meet are interested in knowing whether you will fit in well at their program. The residents may not be able to improve your chances of matching at their program; however, they can hurt your chances if you offend them or act unprofessionally. In last year’s edition of this guide, Chaitan told a story from a reception he attended the night before an interview, where one of the fellow applicants became inebriated and made many derogatory comments about the program he was about to interview at. This applicant’s comments were overheard by several of the residents, who were very offended. And certainly in this situation you can imagine that the residents relayed their observations to the program director, which tremendously hurt that applicant’s chances of matching at that program.
You should always ask the residents anything that you genuinely want to know about their program. Residents expect to answer questions pertaining to their call schedule, how busy their services are, their quality of life, how many hours they work each day, their relationship with the attendings, etc. Never ever indicate that you don’t want to go to a particular program, and never say disparaging things about a program. If you have heard any rumors about how “malignant” the program is, residents that have left the program, or a lack of teaching rounds, be sure to ask the residents about these rumors.

On occasion, you may find yourself in the unfortunate position where you’ll be asked an illegal question. Give some thought as to how you might respond to such a question. Such questions are technically “off-limits”, yet some interviewers still feel the need to ask them, or to rephrase the question in a manner that will still make you feel uncomfortable. Such questions may focus on your plans for a family during your residency (a notorious question often directed towards women), how you intend on ranking a particular program, or what other programs you have previously interviewed at. Give some thought as to how you might answer such questions. You may never be asked these questions, but in case you are, you won’t be caught completely off guard. Rather than flatly refusing to answer these questions, and potentially running the risk of snubbing an interviewer, you may want to offer a “politician’s response.” Here are a few examples:

- “It’s too early in the process for me to know what my top choice program is, but I am very interested in your program and I would be very happy if I match here.”
- “I eventually want to start my family, but I value my education, especially after having gone to school for so many years, and I don’t have plans for it at this time (or and I intend to dedicate the next several years to my residency in …”

After each interview, make notes about each program, including pertinent information that you gathered during your interview day. This note-taking process is very important. By the time you are done with the entire interview trail, you will be surprisingly exhausted. Moreover, all of the programs will blur together, and it will be difficult to differentiate one program from another. Having notes on each program can be very helpful in comparing one program to another.

Applicants tend to go on as many interviews as they feel comfortable going on. However, invariably, students tend to burn out after 10-12 interviews. Once you receive all of your interview invitations, consider which interviews you actually want to go on and which you may want to cancel\(^1\). The more you travel, the more expensive the whole process becomes. Try to reduce your costs by scheduling interviews geographically so that, if you have to fly to a certain area in the US, you can attend several interviews on one trip. Take advantage of special offers from www.priceline.com, www.travelocity.com, www.orbitz.com, and other similar services in order to reduce your fees for hotel reservations\(^2\) and airline tickets.

In order to efficiently schedule interviews, you should have three items easily accessible: e-mail, a cell phone, and an organizer with a calendar. You will be receiving interview invitations both by email and snail-mail. Once you apply to your residency

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\(^1\) Of course, for applicants in very competitive specialties, this may not be an option.

\(^2\) You should be advised that there may be additional processing fees if you use a web-based service to book a reservation at a hotel; thus, it may be cheaper to reserve a hotel room by contacting the hotel directly by phone. Also, be aware that hotels charge a daily parking fee, which in some cases can be as high as $30 per day.
programs, you should check both your email and snail-mail on a daily basis. Once you receive an invitation, you should contact the program immediately in order to schedule your interview. Usually, your interview invitation will contain several choices of interview days. Since there are a limited number of spots for each choice, certain interview days can fill up very quickly. Therefore, the faster you call to schedule your interview date, the more likely you will get your first choice. When you do call to schedule your appointment, be very friendly and considerate when speaking with the office staff, who undoubtedly may be dealing with a tremendous volume of calls coming from many other applicants.

In some instances, there are programs that send out more invitations than they have interview positions. Thus, if you wait too long, their interview days may be “full” by the time that you call to schedule your interview. Should this happen to you, kindly ask to be put on a waiting list. In addition, some programs may just assign you an interview date, while others will send you an option of three dates (even though one or two of them aren’t available). Still, some programs (e.g. orthopedics, dermatology, ophthalmology) may hold interviews on only one or two days, and different programs in a specialty may hold interviews on these same days. Thus, if you experience scheduling conflicts with both of a program’s interview days, you are completely out of luck.

Depending on availability, you may be able to change interview dates so that you can either “geographically block” interviews together to simplify your travel plans, or accommodate any scheduling conflicts that may arise. If you need to reschedule an appointment, do so as early as possible, and do so only once. Don’t become a nuisance to the program’s office staff by changing your interview day 3 or 4 times.

If there is a particular program that you are very interested in, try to schedule your interview for that program in the middle of the interviewing season, and try to avoid scheduling that program as the first interview of the season. This is because, generally speaking, you will become increasingly better at interviewing as you gain more experience from each successive interview. Still, for the vast majority of the programs you’re applying to, don’t be afraid to schedule interviews earlier in the season. It’s easier to deal with a large number of interviews if they are all spread out over a longer period of time.

It is very important to know that not all programs send rejection letters to applicants. This can be very annoying, but it will happen anyway. If you haven’t heard from a program that you have applied to and your classmates have heard from, contact the program to inquire about the status of your application. Sometimes (rarely) this approach might yield an interview invitation. If the program is one that you are especially interested in, or if you haven’t received many invitations for interviews, you may want to ask your advisor or a Dean to call the program on your behalf.

If, after you have scheduled an interview, you decide that you want to cancel your interview, cancel it as early as possible. It is important to give programs notice if you plan to cancel an interview, because it will enable a program to utilize its waiting list. If you cancel at the last minute, or altogether decide not to show up, it will reflect badly on RWJMS. Moreover, if you fail to show up for an interview on the same day that another RWJMS student is interviewing at that same program, you will place your classmate in a very embarrassing situation. In addition, if there is inclement weather that prevents you from attending an interview, be sure to contact the program; some programs may even be able to accommodate a rescheduling request.
**Following Up After Interviews**

It is not exactly clear how much influence a “thank you” letter has with respect to your potential candidacy at a program. Certainly, you will find applicants, in any medical school class, who have matched at top programs without ever having written a thank you note. Nevertheless, you should always thank your interviewer for the time that he or she spent with you. You can either send a letter to each person who interviewed you, or alternatively you may want to send one letter to the program director if you had multiple interviewers. You also may consider putting a small (1”x1”) professional picture of yourself next to your signature so that a program director or interviewer can quickly associate you with the kind letter of thanks. Ideally, your letters should be written on the evening after your interview. (See Part III- Appendix for some sample thank you letters.)

Your letter can be a very simple note, or it can be an elaborate 3-part letter\(^3\). If the program is your first choice, be sure to mention that in your letter. Also, if you happened to do an away rotation at that program and developed good relationships with several residents, here’s a strategy for you to consider. Compliment those residents in a separate thank you letter directed to the program director; this “name dropping” strategy may encourage that program director to ask the residents more questions about their experience in working with you. This can work to your advantage if the residents think that you will fit in well at that program.

On occasion, you may receive positive feedback from a program director. Sometimes, this can be in the form of a letter or an email suggesting that the program will rank you highly. Take this feedback with a grain of salt. There is no written or verbal guarantee that you will match at any residency program, no matter what assurance you get or whoever it is that gives you that assurance. The only “guaranteed” match that you receive is the one you’ll get on match day.

\(^3\) Such letters can include a first section thanking the interviewers for their time, and commenting on how informative the residents were; a second section detailing what you are looking for in a residency program, and how that particular program fulfilled your expectations, and; a third section reaffirming your interest in that program, and your optimistic outlook on the upcoming match day.