

## 8 Things to Consider During Residency Application Process

1. **Do your homework regarding how competitive you are.** Ensure you review all the Match and residency applicant data available to ensure you're competitive for the specialty you're considering. Talk with your specialty-specific advisors about programs you're considering since they'll have a better grasp on program characteristics.

Your school may also have specific information on where past classes have matched. This data can help you gauge how competitive you are at the specialty and program level.

2. **If you're interested in a competitive specialty, cast your net widely and create a parallel plan.** It's no secret that specialties like dermatology, plastic surgery, anesthesiology, otolaryngology, radiology, ophthalmology, and a few others are especially competitive. If you've chosen an especially competitive specialty, plan to apply to more programs to help ensure you'll be successful on Match day. You may also consider a parallel plan, so meet with your advisor early to discuss your individual situation.

3. **Avoid getting too creative with your personal statement.** Programs aren't looking for the next *New Yorker* columnist. They want a simple, one-page statement that describes who you are and why you want to enter their specialty.

Your personal statement provides the chance to highlight your strengths, outline why you're a good match for your chosen specialty, and indicate how their residency program can help you meet your career goals. As one program director panelist said, "Spell well, use good grammar, and get out!"

4. **Your letters of recommendation are important in the screening process, so secure good ones.** Whom do you ask? Someone who knows you and your work. You want at least one and preferably two (out of three or four letters) from someone in your chosen specialty.

To ensure getting a good letter, ask your potential letter-writers if they feel like they know you and your work well enough to write you a strong letter. If there's any hesitation, ask someone else.

5. **Programs review applications early, so submit yours as soon as you can.** Many programs begin reviewing applications as soon as the Electronic Residency Application

Service (ERAS) opens in September, and some begin offering interviews in October. It's to your advantage to plan well in advance for the application process and prepare your materials early.

6. **The interview is a two-way street.** Keep in mind that interviews are critical for both the program and the applicant. While it certainly is your time to shine, it's also your opportunity to assess the program itself and your fit with its residents, faculty, institution, and community. They want you to learn about them as much as they want to learn about you.

Preparation is key, so practice answering common interview questions. You should also consider what characteristics are most important to you in a program so you can formulate questions to ask your interviewers.

7. **Most programs include numerous, different people in their selection process.** A review committee can include faculty, residents, chief residents, program coordinators, and of course the program director. So know people are reviewing your application packet from numerous, different backgrounds and perspectives. You never know what may stand out for one person or be a red flag for others. Being a well-rounded student who's a good fit with the program (see No. 1) can take you far in this process.
8. **The more programs you rank, the better your chance of matching, to a degree.** The National Resident Matching Program® (NRMP®) has collected data on the relationship between the length of an applicant's rank order list and whether they match. The data have consistently shown matched applicants average longer rank order lists than unmatched applicants. In the 2016 main residency Match, U.S. seniors who matched ranked an average of 10.6 programs, while unmatched applicants ranked only 4.7 programs. However, new research from the AAMC finds there are limits to that approach.

## **The real questions behind three challenging interview questions and how to answer them**

Preparing and practicing your responses to interview questions is key to interviewing success. Several questions often asked by interviewers trip up applicants who haven't prepared for them. How you answer these questions can leave a quite positive — or negative — impression on the program interviewers. Here's advice for answering these questions effectively so you can maximize your chance for success.

**What is your greatest strength? weakness?** Interviewers ask this in nearly all interviews — internship, residency, and otherwise.

When interviewers ask this question, they're not really interested in a list of the things you do well and don't. They're more interested in knowing how well you know yourself — how accurately you can assess your own abilities.

Asking about strengths and weaknesses is sort of a silly question, assuming the normal interview situation, where the interviewers are not personally knowledgeable about your abilities. You could tell them almost anything, and they'd have no way of knowing what was true. So what you say is not as important as how you say it.

To successfully convey a strength, discuss something you do well and provide a concrete example that clearly displays that attribute. If the example you relate is also listed on your CV or in your personal statement, it lends greater credence to your answer. Your interviewer will learn how you ascribe worth and value. It's, in a sense, an evidence-based way of identifying your strengths.

To successfully convey a weakness, first know that you should certainly have at least one. No one is comfortable with a person who can identify no weakness in themselves.

But don't just pick any weakness you might have. Identify a personal issue with which you've struggled and with which you've devised a successful strategy for improvement. The important aspect of your answer is what you have done or are doing to improve yourself. Your interviewer will learn how you problem-solve and how you plan to continue the process of learning and growing.

In general, residency programs are attracted to individuals who know who they are, what they want, and where they're going. Your ability to self-evaluate your strengths and weaknesses is one critical component of this self-knowledge. Especially in this case, know what you're going to say before you're asked the question.

**What are the personal characteristics or traits in people that you dislike or find unattractive?** You likely haven't thought much about this question or had it posed to you this way. However, this issue is an important one in internship selection.

Everybody knows of certain people who annoy them. It's important you can recognize these traits, understand why they bother you, and — most importantly — be capable of working professionally with those individuals who express them.

In medicine, we don't choose our patients. And in internship and residency, you'll certainly see all types. You're expected to provide the same professional care for all patients. Internship applicants who recognize their professional duties are much more attractive than ones who don't.

We're also rarely able to choose our colleagues. Few things in life are more random than the match, and it's conceivable you'll be matched to a program with individuals who exhibit some traits you despise. How will you get along with them? What sort of conflict-resolution skills do you have? A residency program director is attracted to applicants who can do the job pleasantly and professionally, even with individuals they wouldn't necessarily choose as friends.

For example, if you've identified a difficulty working with colleagues who seem to shirk responsibility and fail to complete assigned tasks, consider how you dealt with such individuals (hopefully, successfully) in the past. Then consider that particular person as your intern in a couple of years. How would you apply your successful coping strategy to manage this new situation? This is not a question easily answered "off-the-cuff." Again, the more prepared you are, the more effective your response to this question will be.

**Can you tell me about a patient you cared for who was particularly memorable?**

Fortunately, this question is much more straightforward — no hidden agenda. The interviewer wants to get a sense of your clinical reasoning skills. While that may feel a bit intimidating, this question can reap you great rewards because the interviewer has shifted the focus from you and your accomplishments to medicine and patient care.

Prepare a patient case within your discipline that you found particularly memorable, challenging, or educational. Present the patient to your interviewer in about 30–45 seconds, relating just the highlights and concluding with why the patient was so memorable or what you learned. You'll impress your interviewer with your ability to succinctly present a patient.

Additionally, since you prepared ahead of time, you will know absolutely everything about the patient's presentation, differential diagnosis, and management plans and can impress the interviewer with your knowledge and clinical acumen. If you're really lucky, you'll be assigned an interviewer who is an expert on the type of patient you're planning to discuss. Your advance preparation will be impressive, and you'll have a shared experience with your interviewer that will make you a highly memorable candidate.

You'll undoubtedly be asked other questions about your CV, application, and past experiences, which you should be able to answer easily with very little preparation. However, devoting the time to prepare for these three particularly challenging questions will make your interviews more effective. Good luck!

## **Don't Forget to Ask: Advice from Residents on What to Ask During the Residency Interview**

The process of applying and interviewing for a residency position is complicated and can be stressful. This process involves both “selling” yourself to a program, as well as collecting the information that you will need in deciding how to rank the various programs you visit. Programs that you consider will all have unique strengths and weaknesses—some of which may not immediately appear. The following list of questions was created by residents and students from various backgrounds as a guide to assist you in identifying and assessing those strengths and weaknesses. Use this guide in constructing your own more specific questions, and in exploring your own expectations and preferences. Your residency training is an important experience. Identifying the program that is best suited to meet your educational and professional expectations is paramount. Some questions are best answered by other residents in the program, and some questions you will need to ask yourself. Ask the program administrators and residents for specific examples that give a true understanding of the program. Be honest with yourself about how you want your residency experience to be structured. Good luck! And remember, always be yourself.

### **Education**

- Is there an orientation program for incoming residents?
- Is there a formal didactic curriculum, and what is its structure?
- What are the informal learning opportunities (i.e., bedside rounds, etc.)?
- What programs exist for resident education (e.g., lectures, journal clubs, grand rounds, board review courses,)?
- Is there a feedback structure that allows for the resident to evaluate the program’s curriculum?
- Is attendance at regional and national conferences encouraged? Is it funded, and, if so, to what degree?
- What are the required rotations for the first year? Subsequent years?
- Are there any required rotations that take place outside of the city?
- Are there opportunities to do “away” rotations?
- Is there a formal mentoring program for new residents, and do faculty serve as mentors?

### **Research Opportunities**

- Are research opportunities provided to residents? Is this a required experience?
- Is there a possibility of “protected” time for research?
- How are fellowships handled?

### **Teaching Responsibilities**

- What teaching responsibilities for medical students are expected of residents?
- If residents have teaching responsibilities, how much time per week is spent with students? Is it “protected”?

- Is there any formal training for residents on how to teach students and other learners effectively, and how to provide feedback?

### **Clinical Duties**

- What is the general call schedule?
- What provisions are made for back-up call or sick-call coverage?
- What type of structure for supervision is in place?
- Do your residents express that there is an appropriate balance between independence and supervision?
- How does the resident's autonomy change as he/she progresses through the program?
- What type of ancillary support is available (phlebotomy, respiratory therapy, social workers, etc.)?
- Does the general volume of clinical responsibility support a balance between service and education?
- Do your residents express they are involved in too much non-educational activity (i.e., "scut work")?

### **Resident Performance**

- How often are residents evaluated?
- What is the structure of the evaluation (forms, face-to-face, etc.)?
- What other forms of feedback does the resident receive (in-training exam, etc.)?
- What support structures are in place for residents in academic need?

### **Program Performance**

- What is the status of the program's accreditation?
- If there were any citations at the last review, what has been done to correct them?
- When is the next Residency Review Committee (RRC) review?
- Are there any plans for changing the program size or structure?
- What is the status of the last Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) Institutional Review?
- How solid is the financial status of the sponsoring institution?
- How committed is your institution to resident education and graduate medical education in general? How is this evidenced?
- What percent of your residents complete your program?
- What percent of your graduates pass the specialty boards on their first attempt?
- Where do your graduates go (e.g., fellowship, academics, private practice)?

### **Employment Issues**

- What are the basic resident benefits?
- Is parking a concern for residents at your program?
- Are meals paid for when on call?
- What is your family leave policy?
- Is there reimbursement for educational supplies and books?
- Are moonlighting opportunities available?

- What are the rules for moonlighting?
- How are residents represented at the institution level? How is the resident member of GMEC selected?
- Is there a union? Is membership mandatory? Are there dues?
- Is there a House Officers Association? Questions to specifically ask other Residents
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?
- Would you consider the same program if applying again?
- Is there an appropriate balance between service obligations and the educational program?
- Is there enough ancillary support to minimize "scut?"
- What has changed since you came to the program?
- Is the program responsive to suggestions for change?
- How accessible is the faculty?
- Is the relationship with faculty collegial?
- Do the residents get along with one another?
- How do your residents get along with residents in other programs?
- In what activities are you involved outside of the program?
- How does your spouse/significant other like the city/area?

### **Questions to ask Yourself**

Finally, you will likely find yourself facing a decision between one of several programs which are all extremely similar from academic and patient-care standpoints. At this time, it is very important to consider factors relating to your personal happiness and comfort for the duration of your residency.

- Can I be happy working in this program and with these people?
- Am I confident in the program and the sponsoring institution?
- Are there factors that make this place (city/town/rural area) an attractive place for me to live during my residency? (Factors that you may include are proximity to immediate and extended family, happiness of spouse/significant other, housing, cost of living, quality of secondary school system, community opportunities, and recreational activities.)

## Interviewing residency programs

Residency training programs want the best qualified applicants, and interviews are the culmination of that search. So all the pressure is on you to wow the programs, right? Yes and no.

Yes, you must sell yourself effectively and make a great impression, but you're interviewing the program as well. You'll likely be interested in multiple programs, and the interview is your best opportunity to discover which program is the best fit. So how do you try on each program?

**Decide what's most important to you** in a residency program. Each student has different priorities and criteria they want in their program and out of their residency experience, so make a list of and prioritize the factors important to you. Use the [Residency Preference Exercise](#) to develop a list of essential characteristics to help you search and narrow your list of programs.

**Do your homework.** Research programs using their website and pre-interview materials as well as your contacts who are connected with the program. The more informed you are, the more insightful the questions you can ask during the interview.

**Ask the right questions.** You're seeking a program that will live up to your expectations and assist in meeting your educational and professional goals. So develop questions that will help you collect the information you need to make a good decision.

Interested in conducting research? Ask about research track opportunities or the work of an investigator in the department whose research interests you. Is a fellowship in your future? Ask what percentage of graduates enter fellowships and in what fields. [Don't Forget to Ask: Advice from Residents on What to Ask during the Residency Interview](#) includes a broad list of questions to help you start.

**Prepare a long list of questions.** Almost every interviewer will ask for your questions about the program, so be prepared with many thoughtful ones. An interviewer might even defer the direction of the interview to you, and being prepared with plenty of questions will allow you to take the reins with confidence.

**Direct your questions to the proper person.** Some questions will be more appropriate for the program director, while some will be better suited for the residents.

Have questions about program performance? Those are best answered by the program director. Want to know how supportive the faculty is? Ask the residents. Prepare your list of questions by interviewer and topic so you're securing answers that help you best determine the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

**Don't ask about salary, benefits, and vacation.** Even though these are important questions, it's poor form. Interviewers will likely think you're primarily concerned with the perks rather than the educational experience.



And since this information is typically provided in a presentation or other materials, you should be able to avoid asking for it during the interview.

**Compile the information.** It's fine to jot a few notes during the interview, but conduct the majority of your note-taking immediately following the interview day.

Take a moment to recall the answers to the questions you asked and write them down along with your feelings and general impressions of the program. After a few interviews, many of the programs start to look alike and you'll be grateful for any information that will help you distinguish and choose among them. All the questions you ask and the answers (or non-answers!) you receive will help broaden and deepen your knowledge of the program and your ultimate compatibility.

## THE STAR METHOD of interviewing

The STAR method is a structured manner of responding to a behavioral-based interview question by discussing the specific situation, task, action, and result of the situation you are describing.

**Situation:** Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.

**Task:** What goal were you working toward?

**Action:** Describe the actions you took to address the situation with an appropriate amount of detail and keep the focus on YOU. What specific steps did you take and what was your particular contribution? Be careful that you don't describe what the team or group did when talking about a project, but what you actually did. Use the word "I," not "we" when describing actions.

**Result:** Describe the outcome of your actions and don't be shy about taking credit for your behavior. What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? Make sure your answer contains multiple positive results.

Make sure that you follow all parts of the STAR method. Be as specific as possible at all times, without rambling or including too much information. Oftentimes students have to be prompted to include their results, so try to include that without being asked. Also, eliminate any examples that do not paint you in a positive light. However, keep in mind that some examples that have a negative result (such as "lost the game") can highlight your strengths in the face of adversity.

### SAMPLE STAR RESPONSE:

**Situation (S):** Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, *The Review*, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

**Task (T):** My goal was to generate new ideas, materials and incentives that would result in at least a 15% increase in advertisers from the year before.

**Action (A):** I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of *The Review* circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set-up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

**Result (R):** We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent over the same period last year.

## **SAMPLE BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Practice using the STAR Method on these common behavioral interviewing questions:

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Tell me about a difficult decision you've made in the last year.
- Give me an example of a time when something you tried to accomplish and failed.
- Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead.
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker.
- Give me an example of a time when you motivated others.
- Tell me about a time when you delegated a project effectively.
- Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.
- Please tell me about a time you had to fire a friend.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

## **HOW TO PREPARE FOR A BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW**

- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially involving course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
- Prepare short descriptions of each situation; be ready to give details if asked.
- Be sure each story has a beginning, middle, and an end, i.e., be ready to describe the situation, including the task at hand, your action, and the outcome or result.
- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).
- Be honest. Don't embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.
- Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.
- Vary your examples; don't take them all from just one area of your life.

## Frequently asked interview questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why did you become a doctor?
3. How would your friends describe you?
4. What are your strengths and weaknesses?
5. Why are you interested in our program?
6. What are you looking for in a program?
7. Why should we choose you?
8. Can you tell me about this deficiency on your record?
9. Why are you interested in this specialty?
10. Tell us about your research experience.
11. If you could not be a physician, what career would you choose?
12. What do you see yourself doing in the future?
13. What leadership roles have you held?
14. What do you do in your spare time?
15. What was your favorite course in medical school?
16. Why did you choose this specialty?
17. What are your goals?
18. Are you interested in academic or in clinical medicine?
19. Do you want to do research?
20. What was the most interesting case that you have been involved in?
21. Do you plan to do a fellowship?
22. What is your most important accomplishment?
23. What motivates you?
24. What will be the toughest aspect of this specialty for you?
25. If you could do medical school over again, what would you change?
26. What do you think you can contribute to this program?
27. Do you foresee any problems managing a professional and a personal life?
28. Are you prepared for the rigors of residency?
29. How much did lifestyle considerations fit into your choice of specialty?
30. Describe the best/worst attending with whom you have ever worked.
31. What is the greatest sacrifice you have already made to get to where you are?
32. What problems will our specialty face in the next 5-10 years?
33. How would you describe yourself?
34. List three abilities you have that will make you valuable as a resident in this specialty.
35. Describe a particularly satisfying or meaningful experience during your medical training.  
Why was it meaningful?
36. What is one event you are proudest of in your life?
37. What was the most difficult situation you encountered in medical school?
38. What clinical experiences have you had in this specialty?
39. How well do you take criticism?
40. What questions do you have for me?

Student Name  
Specialty Interest

Interviewer Name  
Specialty

**Appearance**

**Written Suggestions**

Was the applicant appropriately dressed?

1 2 3 4 5

Did the applicant appear comfortable and at ease?

1 2 3 4 5

**Non-Verbal Communication**

**Written Suggestions**

Used bridge words? (Uh, um, like)

1 2 3 4 5

Maintains appropriate eye contact?

1 2 3 4 5

Avoided distracting movements? (Fidgeting)

1 2 3 4 5

**Responses**

**Written Suggestions**

Appeared prepared to answer your questions?

1 2 3 4 5

Took advantage of opportunities to highlight strengths?

1 2 3 4 5

Responses showed passion and interest?

1 2 3 4 5

Interviewing Strengths	
Interviewing Weaknesses	
Would this interview have improved the applicants standing on the rank list?	