

Overview: Interviewing for Residency

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.
- Sell yourself, be confident (not cocky), and maximize this opportunity.

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). Shine those shoes, trim those fingernails, tame that hair, and skip the heavy cologne and body piercings.

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 “professional.” 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

Just as you carefully choose your interview outfit to convey a successful, mature resident and physician, also consider the message you convey through your online presence. It's possible, and even likely, at least one person at each residency program will search the Internet for you prior to your interview — if they didn't do so before offering you the opportunity. If you haven't already, review your online presence and [clean up or lock down](#) any content that does not promote that image of a successful, mature physician.

Interviewing for residency: Practice makes perfect

You're wearing your most conservative blue suit (always a classic), and your white shirt is crisp and flawless. Your shoes are shined, your hair is coiffed, and you've practiced your very best answer to “Tell me about yourself” what feels like a hundred times. You're ready for the dreaded rite-of-passage that is the residency interview.

There's plenty of advice about interviewing out there, but we wanted to boil it down to the basics for you and talk about what to expect and how to prepare. Let's start with the format.

Format

Most residency interviews last a half to a full day and may include a presentation by the program director, an opportunity to go on rounds, a hospital tour, lunch (frequently with current residents), and individual interviews with faculty and the program director. There may also be a reception or other social outing the evening before the

interview day to give you a chance to get to know current residents and ask questions in a less formal setting. Take advantage of as many opportunities to learn about the program and interact with current housestaff as you can.



Preparation

Programs may differ on how they conduct interviews, which makes preparation even more crucial. You have to prepare well by knowing all you can about both yourself and the residency program.

Knowing yourself should be easy, right? After all, you live with you! But most people give very little thought to their overall career goals or may have a difficult time articulating them. In the interview you should be able to talk easily about why you chose your specialty, what qualities and skills you would bring to the program, your career goals, and, most importantly, why you want to train in their program.

Knowing the program is the other half of good preparation. It's hard to talk about why you're the right candidate if you don't know much about the program. Read all the materials they send prior to the interview. Review the program website and the institution's website, talk to advisors and faculty at your school who may be familiar with the program, and research the program director and key faculty members.

Practice

Once you know all you can about yourself and the program, it's useful to get some practice. Many schools offer mock interview programs or encourage practice interviews with advisors. Take advantage of these opportunities to hone your answers to commonly asked questions and pinpoint any weaknesses or areas of concern. If your school does not offer formal assistance, here's a list of [frequently asked interview questions](#). Use these to rehearse with a friend or roommate. Interviewing well is a skill, and you can improve with persistence and practice.

After all this work, the good news is that programs want to find good candidates and they generally want you to be successful. Most interviews will be friendly and conversational.

Interviewing can be nerve-wracking and exhausting but you'll find that good preparation and research can make your time on the interview trail easier and more successful.

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?
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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 interviewer's 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 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.

On the interview trail

You've been worrying about interview invites, spending your bank account balance on travel, preparing for every possible interview question, and practicing your dazzling smile in the mirror. It's almost show time. But first, a few tips to ensure the best first impression possible:



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 a parking spot or getting lost on the way to an interview. Inquire about parking or other transportation in advance and if possible, make a trial run.

Be confident and professional. You'll probably be nervous, and that's to be expected. Despite that, 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 elicit more valuable information about the program if you're friendly and open.

Be professional with current residents. Remember, everything you say before, during, and after the interview is on the record. Even when you're speaking informally with residents, be careful what you say.

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

Be enthusiastic and show your interest in their program. If you have done your research and are truly interested, this should be relatively easy. As you travel the interview trail, enthusiasm is frequently half the battle. Try to remain positive and upbeat.

After each interview

Capture your impressions immediately after each interview. As you travel the interview trail, the programs start to look alike.

As soon as you can, write down all your impressions of the program. Use the [Residency Program Evaluation Guide](#), completing a form for each program with whom you interviewed. Doing so will establish a solid baseline, so you can compare apples to apples.

Then review your Residency Preference Profile and compare and rate programs using the [Residency Preference Exercise](#). Rate each new residency compared with previous ones and regularly update the rankings.

Also, consider the questions to ask yourself in the AAMC's Organization of Resident Representative's brochure *Don't Forget to Ask: Advice from Residents on What to Ask During the Residency Interview*. You'll find your notes about each program invaluable when it's time to create your rank order list for the match.

Follow up. [Send a personalized thank you letter or note](#) to the program director. Handwritten notes are always nice but e-mail is usually fine as well. Emphasize the points about the residency and site that were particularly appealing, and restate how your background or personal qualities qualify you as a good match for the program. Also mention your continued interest and enthusiasm for the program.

Good luck!