

Medical Student Guide to the Ophthalmology Match

University of Minnesota

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Introduction

The Ophthalmology Match is a unique process for medical students. Unlike your classmates, you will need to apply through two separate application services, the San Francisco Match **and** ERAS. Since ophthalmology is the only residency program that utilizes the San Francisco Match service, there is often limited understanding and few resources available to medical students interested in applying for ophthalmology. In addition, your timeline for SF Match applications will be earlier (approximately 1 month earlier) than your peers, which will require you to gather and assemble materials sooner. Therefore, we have assembled a central document that contains everything you will need to know to survive this confusing yet exciting match process. Hopefully you will find this information helpful!

Terminology

San Francisco Match (SF Match): The system used for medical students applying into Ophthalmology as well as residents applying for some of the fellowships within Anesthesiology, Dermatology, Neurology, Neurosurgery, Ophthalmology, Orthopaedics, Otolaryngology, and Plastic Surgery. SF Match day for Ophthalmology residency occurs in mid-January.

Central Application Service (CAS): The application process used by SF Match applicants. Although the electronic portion allows you to manage your application, application materials (i.e. transcripts and letters of recommendation) are assembled by you. You will be responsible for uploading USMLE scores and college transcript. The school will electronically upload your LORs, MSPE, and medical school transcript.

Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS): The system used to match into all residency specialties (except for ophthalmology and urology). EVERY medical student applies through ERAS because even ophthalmology applicants will at least need to apply for a preliminary (internship) program, which is only provided through ERAS.

National Residency Match Program (NRMP): The system that matches applicants using ERAS. NRMP Match day is mid-March.

Categorical Residency: A residency program that provides both internship and residency training, typically 3-7 years long. Examples include Internal Medicine, Ob/Gyn, Pediatrics, and Surgery.

Advanced Residency: A residency program that provides specialty training beginning in your second year of residency (post-graduate year 2, PGY-2) and requires prior completion of a preliminary/intern year program. Examples include Anesthesiology, Dermatology, Ophthalmology, and some Radiology programs.

Preliminary/Intern Program: A prelim/intern program is required before beginning an advanced residency such as Ophthalmology. They can be a transitional year, preliminary medicine, preliminary surgery, or even preliminary pediatrics. (We will talk about the difference between these programs later in the guide.) Some residency programs will require a certain *type* of internship, so be sure to check requirements. To date, very few Ophthalmology programs have a specific required intern year program that you must participate in if you match with them, though

many will have connections (or possibly even optional reserved positions) with local transition year or prelim (typically medicine) programs.

Timeline

(2016-2017 Dates)

	SF Match		NRMP	
Early Match Prep	Update CV, begin collecting letters of recommendation, research programs, meet with advisors			
May	Work on personal statement, collect LORs,			Work on personal statement, collect LORs
June		June 1: SF Match registration opens Work on electronic CAS application, request transcripts and USMLE score reports for CAS	June 5: ERAS opens Work on ERAS application	
July				
August				
September	**Aug 15: target date for CAS application submission		**Sept 15: First day to submit ERAS, Target date for LORs, NRMP	
October	Various program submission deadlines, check for supplementals	Interview offers begin late Sept		
November	Interviews		Oct 1: MSPE released	
December				
January		January 4: OPHTHO MATCH LIST DUE January 11: Match results sent to program directors and med schools January 12: Match results online		Interviews
February				Feb 21: Deadline to certify Rank Order List
March				March 12-15: SOAP for unmatched applicants March 16: NRMP Match Day

Preparing Your Application

Letters of Recommendation (LORs)

Collecting LORs

You will need a minimum of **3** letters of recommendation. When asking for a letter of recommendation, it is best to ask in person. However, email will also work if that is not possible. We recommend **2** letters from ophthalmologists and **1** from a faculty member on a core clerkship (Medicine, Surgery, Pediatrics). For ophthalmology, you might choose a research advisor, mentor, or attending you worked closely with during your clerkship or away rotation. There is no requirement that a LOR be from a program director, but if you can obtain one it does look very good on your application. Ophthalmology is a small field, so letters from well-known individuals can help your application, but only if they know you well. In general, **make sure you choose someone who knows you well** and can vouch for your character, work ethic, and enthusiasm for the field. If using a LOR from a clerkship, ask the letter writer during or immediately after your clerkship, while your work is still fresh in their mind.

The best piece of advice is to ask for letters of recommendation **early**. Remember, your letter writers are busy people. Give them *at least four weeks' notice* (two months is even better!) before you need the letter. Make it easy for your letter writer by providing everything they need: your CV, a draft of your personal statement, and a copy of the ERAS LOR cover sheet. (There are slight differences in how SF Match and ERAS handles LORs, which we will explain below.) Often, if you are asking for LORs well before application time, faculty members will make notes about you or even draft their letter shortly after your time with them, but will still request your personal statement and CV to update and finalize their letter closer to the submission date.

SF Match: You will need your 3 letters of recommendation uploaded by the school to SF match **before** you submit your application around **August 15**. CAS will only accept 3 LORs – no more, no less. Until 2016, CAS required applicants to mail LORs with their application and transcripts. Now, the CAS application process has been simplified as everything is submitted online through the application. You are responsible for submitting USMLE scores and college transcripts. The school is responsible for uploading your medical school transcript and LORs. The simplest way of doing this is by contacting your letter writer and having them email your LOR to your Dean's Office, who will then upload the LOR on your behalf. Should you choose to mail your LOR to your Dean's Office, it may be helpful to ask for **two** sealed, signed copies from each letter writer, in the rare chance that your application packet is lost in the mail. ****Confidential letters must each remain in a sealed, signed envelope (ask the letter writer to sign his/her name across the seal of the envelope).****

These same 3 letters of recommendation will be sent to **ALL** the ophthalmology programs you apply to. Because CAS distributes your application, you cannot send different combinations of letters to specific schools. However, if you want to send an additional LOR, some programs will allow you to send it directly to them as a supplemental material before or after you have been offered an interview. Check with these programs first and ask which address to send it to. Because the medical school Dean's Office no longer holds confidential copies of LORs, you may either need to request the letter writer to send supplemental letters directly to programs or talk with your school's Office of Student Affairs for advice on submitting extra letters confidentially.

Of note, as part of a 3-year pilot project, letter writers now have the option complete an “**Ophthalmology Standardized Letter of Evaluation**” (SLOE) for students/graduates as an alternative to the formal LOR. Briefly, the SLOE asks your letter writer to rank you compared to your peers in several categories: interest in ophthalmology, motivation, technical skills, teamwork, and communication. It is your choice for what type of letter you want, but it is important to know that this option exists as it may become required for future applicants. Here is a link to the SLOE: https://www.sfmatch.org/PDFFilesDisplay/OPHTHR_StandardizedLOR.pdf

ERAS: You can assign up to 4 letters of recommendation for each program you apply to through ERAS. Unlike with CAS, you are able to individually select which letters you want sent to each program you apply to through ERAS. Just because a letter is uploaded into ERAS does not mean you must use it in your application. For this reason, it is always nice to ask for more LORs than you need. Unlike with CAS, LORs are electronically uploaded to ERAS by the letter writers themselves. All this requires is that you provide your recommender with the ERAS LOR cover sheet (available under *Documents > Letters of Recommendation* in ERAS) – it can be emailed to them. ***Important note:*** you **can** submit your ERAS application on **September 15** (opening day) without having all of your letters uploaded; letters that trickle in later can be sent at a later date to programs you have already applied to. Do not feel like you need to wait for all of your letters to be uploaded in order to submit your ERAS application! It is of the utmost importance to submit your ERAS application by **September 15th**.

Personal Statement

Writing the personal statement can be one of the most daunting tasks of the entire application process. This is the best opportunity for you to express your unique personality and experiences and how they have shaped your path to ophthalmology. You will pour many hours into your personal statement. The key is to **start early** and **revise, revise, revise!** You should aim to have all application materials complete by **August 15**, so start working on your personal statement as early as May or June so you have plenty of opportunities to revise. Ask friends and mentors to proofread your personal statement. There are no requirements for length on the personal statement, but the people who will be reading this will have *hundreds* of personal statements and applications to review. For this reason, it is best to aim for less than one page, single-spaced.

For your ERAS application, many ophthalmology applicants use the same personal statement they used for SF Match with a few minor revisions in the final paragraph saying why they would like to do a specific type of internship program or go to a particular city. You can upload as many personal statements to ERAS as you would like and select the personal statement for each program in ERAS, thus making it easy to tailor your personal statement to each program you apply to in ERAS. You do **NOT** have this same luxury with the SF Match; you will submit the same personal statement to all programs – so do not include anything in your SF Match personal statement about program or location preference.

Other tips for writing personal statements can be found on the Residency Information website through the University of Minnesota (<https://www.med.umn.edu/md-students/academic-success-assistance/career-guidance-match/residency-match>).

Medical Student Performance Evaluation - MSPE (Dean’s Letter)

The MSPE, or Dean’s Letter as it was formerly named, is the Medical Student Performance Evaluation. The MSPE is not a letter of recommendation but instead an evaluation report that is

meant to briefly summarize your academic and clinical experiences in medical school. There is slight variation in the layout of the MSPE between different schools, but for the most part it consists of an introduction your Years 1 & 2 grades, clerkship grades and verbatim evaluation comments, and a final page written by your faculty advisor summarizing your achievements or a statement about your class rank. The Dean's Office will assemble your MSPE. You may have an opportunity to proofread your entire MSPE, including the clerkship evaluations and final summary paragraph before it is completed. If you have new grades or evaluations that are posted after the initial draft, simply ask to have these included. Your school's Office of Student Affairs will release your MSPE to ERAS and SF Match on **October 1**. Because of the timeline of SF Match, you may already have interview offers at the time the MSPE is released so many programs do not rely heavily on the information contained in the MSPE for interview selection.

Transcripts

Undergraduate Transcript: You will need one copy of your undergraduate transcript(s) to submit with your CAS documents to SF Match. **YOU** are responsible for submitting this electronically. Per CAS, the transcript(s) may be official copies or student issued copies of the official transcript(s).

Medical School Transcript: You will need one official copy of your medical school transcript, which you will release to your school. The Dean's Office will upload and submit this to both CAS and ERAS.

Per CAS, they do accept student issued (unofficial) transcripts with the initial application. If you submit an unofficial copy of your transcript, an official copy should be included with the MSPE.

The University charges a fee for each official transcript request, and remember to allow at least one week for processing before you need the transcript.

USMLE Score Reports

You must submit a report of your USMLE Step 1 score (and Step 2 CK, if available) with your CAS materials (including the performance profile page). Hopefully you saved a PDF/printed this off from the NBME website when you received your score report. If not, check your NBME account to see if you can still access your score report. Unfortunately, this score report eventually expires, and if that is the case, you must now request an official USMLE transcript and pay the \$70 fee. (Instructions for doing so are provided here: <http://www.nbme.org/Cert-tran/Scores-and-transcripts.html>.)

Photos

Your medical school may offer professional residency photos in the summer and the electronic file will be available (for a small fee) later in August or September. You do not need to have a photo submitted to CAS at the time you submit your application; this can be updated at any time, if the SF Match has not yet distributed your information to programs. You are responsible for uploading your photo electronically to both CAS and ERAS. Most programs will not view your photo prior to interviews and some may still request a photo from you prior to your interview day (to serve as a visual reminder when they are making their rank list).

Selecting Programs

Selecting the programs you are going to apply to can be a tough process. There are currently around 110 to 120 ophthalmology residency programs in the country. Start by printing a list of all the ophthalmology residency programs (available on SF Match portal under “Program Directory”). Bring this list to an ophthalmology mentor and go through the list together, picking out a reasonable number of “top, medium, and lower” tier programs to apply to. Your ophthalmology mentors and other faculty from your home department are excellent resources and they are happy to help you out if you just ask! Other resources with information about program size, pay, and other statistics are: FREIDA (through the AMA), Doximity, the Residency Compendium thread on Student Doctor Network, Scutwork, MatchApplicants, and program websites. However, take the information that you read on forum-type websites with a grain of salt, as there is no way to know who is writing such reviews.

You can find lists of “top ranked ophthalmology residency programs” online, which often consists of the same top schools permuted in different orders from year to year. It is true these programs consistently match top-notch applicants, but it is not necessarily a reflection on the quality of training you will receive. *You must figure out what kind of residency program you are looking for:* academic vs. community, whether doing research is of high importance to you, and what location you want to be in. For this reason, apply to a variety of programs from all tiers of schools.

As with other competitive specialties, you will quickly realize that you will need to apply to more ophthalmology programs than your colleagues applying to other specialties. Most applicants aim for getting 10-12 interviews because this coincides with a high match rate. Consider these statistics from the SF Match webpage: In 2018, the average matching applicant’s USMLE Step 1 score was 245 and the average applicant applied to 73 programs. These statistics continue trend upward each year. Consider your own USMLE Step 1 score as a sort of guideline as to how many programs to which you should apply.

Submitting Your Application

The SF Match uses the Central Application Service (CAS) to collect all documents and distribute them to the programs you have selected. Detailed instructions for CAS can be found on the SF Match website.

The application submission deadline for some programs is as early as August 31st, which means that you *and* the Dean's Office must have submitted all parts of your application to CAS, they must have processed it, and then distributed it to the program by August 31st. The application may take up to 2-3 weeks to process, which is why we recommend submitting by **August 15th**. Of course, this is not a hard deadline, as many programs' deadlines extend later into September or October, but it is always better to be prompt as you may be eligible for the first round of interview offers by submitting your materials early!

Required Application Materials

There are four main portions to your application:

1. Electronic CAS Application Form (On-line via SF Match portal):

Filling out the electronic CAS application form is much like copying and pasting parts of your CV. Many sections of the CAS are open text blocks (unlike ERAS), so formatting is critical!

DO fully utilize **bolding**, *italics*, and underlining functions to format your sections to make them easily readable. DO use lists, numbering, or bullet points. DO NOT use large blocks of text or paragraphs (except in your personal statement). Note that there may be line limitations to some sections. DO preview your CAS application multiple times, as the text may appear slightly different when it is converted to PDF format on submission.

This is just one example of how you might choose to format sections:

Public Service and Activities: *(standard section)*

Name of community service group: Role, *Location*, *Dates participated*

- One sentence summary of activity and what you did

Research activities, papers, and/or additional information: *(standard section)*

Publications

Authors [*bold your name*] (Year). Title. *Journal*, Volume(Issue):Pages. PMID

Research Activities

Lab/Department: Role, *Affiliated University*, *Dates participated*

- One sentence summary of project and your role

- Poster presentation: Authors [*bold your name*]. Title. *Conference*, Location, Date.

Note: Once you submit your application, you are unable to edit it! This underscores the importance of having multiple people proofread your application.

2. Payment and list of programs (On-line via SF Match portal):

Once you select the programs from the program directory, you must also select “apply to programs.” Distribution fees increase progressively based on the number of programs you apply to (see SF Match website for most up-to-date fees):

<u># of programs</u>	<u>Processing Fee</u>
1-10	\$60 total
11-20	\$10 per program
21-30	\$15 per program
31-40	\$20 per program
41 and up	\$35 per program

If you want to apply to additional programs after you have submitted your application, you will be charged \$35 per program *regardless* of how many programs total you have already applied to. Make sure to keep this in mind when you submit online!

Applying to ophthalmology residency, as well as transitional year and/or prelim medicine and/or prelim surgery, is incredibly costly. Many applicants spend >\$1,500 on the application alone. When you factor in travel, hotels/Airbnb, food, Uber/Lyft, clothes, etc., the cost rises to several thousands of dollars. If possible, try to set aside some money each year to help pay for the expense of interviews.

3. Submission of documents (via postal service):

The documents required for submission to CAS/SF Match have been outlined in detail previously. Here is a checklist for you to ensure you have all the required materials in hand before submitting them:

Required Documents:

- College Transcript(s)
- Medical School Transcript(s)
- Three letters of recommendation
- USMLE Step 1 Score report

Optional Documents:

- AOA Election Letter
- USMLE Step 2 CK Score report (only if you have received a score by this date)

You can check the SF Match portal to see the status of your submitted documents. Again, **aim to have all documents uploaded by August 15th if you want them to be distributed to the programs with deadlines as early as August 31st.**

4. MSPE (submitted by your medical school)

Supplemental Application Materials

Required Supplemental Materials

Many residency programs require supplemental materials in addition to those submitted via CAS. Common examples include:

- Brief essay outlining why you are interested in their program

- CV
- Recent eye exam with stereopsis and color vision (**Note:** stereopsis and color vision are not typically measured in the standard eye exam, so make sure to ask specifically for them.)
- **For ophthalmology, at least 60 degrees of stereoacuity are required.**
- Photo

Be prepared and research every program you are applying to ahead of time, including required supplemental materials and deadlines. It would be a bummer to pay the application fee for a school but to not be considered just because you forgot to send them your recent eye exam

To find required supplemental materials: Once you have an account with SF Match, you can view the complete list of ophthalmology residency programs for your match cycle by going to your account, click on “Program Directory,” leave the Search criteria blank and click “Search.” There will be brief descriptions about each program, including application deadlines, supplemental materials, interview dates, and program coordinator contact info.

Optional Supplemental Materials

After interviews are offered, you may also choose to send the programs supplemental materials such as:

- Additional letters of recommendation
- Letters notifying program of recent AOA election (if applicable)
- USMLE Step 2 CS and/or CK score reports

Check with the program beforehand if they will accept additional LORs and what address they can be sent to. Again, because the medical school Dean’s Office no longer holds confidential copies of LORs, you may either need to request the letter writer to send supplemental letters directly to programs or talk with your school’s Office of Student Affairs for advice on submitting extra letters confidentially.

AOA letters and Step 2 scores received early enough may also be distributed to all the programs to which you are applying by submitting it to CAS.

There is a sweet spot for when to take Step 2CK. If you have a competitive Step 1 score, it is to your advantage to delay taking Step 2CK until after the CAS application submission goal of August 15th. Step 2CK score reports are posted 3-4 weeks after taking the test, so you can always submit your score to a program then. You are **not required** to report your Step 2CK score if you have already submitted your CAS application.

ERAS for the Ophthalmology Applicant

After completing the application for SF Match and facing the formatting of CAS, ERAS will seem like a breeze in comparison. You can use most of the same information you used in your CAS application and personal statement for ERAS; programs will know you are primarily interested in ophthalmology and will understand when your application is repeatedly referring to ophthalmology.

Transitional Year vs. Prelim Year?

As mentioned earlier, very few ophthalmology programs have a specific required intern year program that you must participate in if you match with them, though many will have connections (or possibly even optional saved positions) with local transitional year or prelim (typically medicine) programs. Therefore, one of the biggest challenges will be in deciding which intern positions to apply for. The terminology is often very confusing so here is a brief review of the different types of intern programs you can apply for:

Transitional Year

This intern year usually consists of ~5 ward months and allows at least a few months for electives (ED, surgery, radiology, dermatology, etc.). This route is desirable to people who want more flexibility and diversity of rotations than prelims, as transitional year programs are designed for those pursuing advanced residencies in another specialty. You are also better able to tailor this year to your specific interests. The drawback is that many cities do not have transitional year programs available, making these programs relatively more competitive than prelims.

Preliminary Medicine Year

This is a one-year internship in an internal medicine department where you will be doing essentially the same work as the categorical medicine interns. There are usually ~7 ward months and electives are done in medicine specialties like cardiology, pulmonology, rheum, ID, etc. Individuals who complete premed years report having learned more about medicine than those completing transitional years.

Preliminary Surgery Year

This is a one-year internship in surgery with electives being in the surgical subspecialties (if any electives are offered). As you can imagine, interns in these programs typically work very hard, like most surgical interns. Fewer ophthalmology interns pursue this route, but occasionally you will find certain programs that may require completion of a surgical year. Prelim surgery positions are generally significantly easier to acquire for ophthalmology applicants (as they are often high quality applicants overall) and many of these types of programs do not fill all their available premed positions.

Preliminary Pediatrics Year

This is a one-year internship in pediatrics. This is only recommended if you are very serious about pursuing pediatric ophthalmology.

Most ophthalmology applicants apply to a combination of transitional and premed medicine programs. You can take advantage of this one year to live in an exotic, fun new city or try to coordinate your NRMP match with SF Match. There is no recommended number of programs you should apply to for intern positions. You may want to apply to several you are serious about

initially, and later apply to more by geography as interview offers from ophthalmology programs begin to roll in. The following fees apply for distribution of your ERAS application to schools:

<u># of programs</u>	<u>Application Fee</u>
1-10	\$99 total
11-20	\$13 per program
21-30	\$17 per program
31 and up	\$26 per program

In ERAS, the baseline rate of \$99 covers up to 10 programs in **one** specialty. If you apply to both TY and Prelim Med programs, you will have to pay the baseline cost for both programs (\$200 total) and the extra fees as above for any extra in each specialty.

Interviews

Waiting for interview offers to come can be the most anxiety-provoking part of the entire match process. Although you will submit your SF Match application long before your NRMP classmates, your interview offers will probably still come *after* theirs do. The best advice I can give you is **DO NOT FRET!** Interview offers come slowly; trickling in starting mid-September and peaking in mid to late October. For programs that you are **very** interested in or where you have ties to the area, it might not hurt to send an e-mail expressing your **specific** interest to the program coordinator. In the past, this has been successful in placing applicants on interview waitlists or even resulted in interview offers!

Scheduling Interviews

Ophthalmology interview season starts earlier than your NRMP colleagues, with the first interviews being in late September and going up until December 20th or so. During the 2017 interview season, the busiest weeks were the week before Thanksgiving and the first full week of December. It will be important to have a flexible schedule during this time, as there are not many ophthalmology interview dates. This can be especially challenging if you are on a rotation that is not particularly flexible with time off for interviews. If you have a rotation during this time, inform your clerkship director *as early as possible* about absences for interviews.

Some programs will extend more interview offers than they have space for, which means you could miss out on an interview opportunity if you do not promptly reply to an interview offer. Having a **smartphone is a MUST**. Prompt responses to interview offers (**on the order of minutes!**) help you to get the interviews **when** and **where** you want them – so make sure you have your e-mail notifications on!

It is probably best to take time off or to schedule a research elective during November/December. The AAO Annual Meeting, Thanksgiving, and the Holidays cause a clustering of interviews within a couple of critical weeks. During this time, it is common to have 3-7 consecutive interviews, making it impossible to comply with the medical school's excused absences policy. Programs schedule like this on purpose to help weed out applicants who are not fully committed to their program. You may also get TY or Prelim interviews in November/December that take up additional time.

Anticipating Interviews

Because many ophthalmology programs have only 3-4 spots, often there may be only 1, 2, or 3 interview dates per program. It is helpful to do a little bit of planning beforehand to avoid overlaps and ensure you can attend as many interviews as possible.

If you like to be organized, many people create a master calendar of all the interview dates for the programs they applied to. This allows you to flag certain dates for programs you are very serious about interviewing at so you can leave that date available. There are several possible places to find the interview dates posted:

- SF Match website under “Program Directory”
- FREIDA
- The program’s residency website
- Student Doctor Network – in past years, there has been an “Ophtho Interview Thread” where other candidates will post the dates as offers begin

Overlapping Interview Offers

Interview season is short and very busy, and you will likely have two (or more) interview offers that conflict with each other. This is when having a “master calendar” of interview dates is helpful, so you can look for alternative interview dates. Call or email the program coordinator and explain that you are very serious about interviewing at their program and would like to move to another interview date if possible. If their other dates are full, ask to be put on a waiting list. If none of these work, you will ultimately have to choose the program you are more interested in.

Packing for Your Interviews

If you are flying, we recommend traveling with a carry-on and personal item to avoid losing luggage along the way (garment bags *do* count as a personal item). If it cannot be avoided and you must check your bag, try to at least keep your suit and shoes in your carry-on. Below are some more suggested items for packing:

- Suit and dress shirt
- Interview day shoes (comfortable enough for walking tours)
- Professional-looking coat (i.e. not your ski jacket)
- Umbrella
- Wrinkle-release spray for suit
- Tide-to-Go pen
- GPS, car charger for phone (if you will be getting a rental car)
- Professional folder for taking notes and to carry copies of your CV, research, etc.

Inevitably your suit will get wrinkled along the interview trail, especially when you have back-to-back interviews. Placing your suit in the hotel bathroom and running the shower on hot to steam the suit can help considerably with removing wrinkles. Ironing a suit is not ideal but can also be done to help remove tough wrinkles.

Preparing for Interview Day

Aside from making all of your travel plans, we recommend doing a little research about the program before your interview by looking over the program’s website. During your research, formulate 5-10 questions about the program. Avoid questions about information clearly presented on the website or elsewhere so you do not look like you did not do your research on the program.

There are also many helpful websites with sample interview questions you may be asked. Spend time thinking about your answers.

Questions you can count on being asked are:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why do you want to go into ophthalmology?
- Why are you interested in our residency program?
- Why should we pick you for our residency program?
- What are you looking for in a residency program?
- Tell me about one of your biggest failures.
- Tell me about your biggest accomplishment.
- Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?
- Do you plan to complete a fellowship?
- Tell me more about <insert something from your application>.

The night before, review every component of your application (CV/CAS, MSPE, personal statement, research papers) because any of it is fair game for interview questions.

Interview Day

Relax. Be yourself. Remember that they are most likely looking for a colleague who is personable, friendly, professional, and pleasant to work with during your three years at their program. You have made it this far and have a stellar application; sell yourself and back it up with your friendly personality. Remember that the ophthalmology program you are interviewing with is trying to create a good impression of the faculty and facility as it is also important for them to be ranked highly by you!

Interview Attire

Business professional is the universal attire for interview day. Suits with tie for men and pants or skirt suit for women. Make sure your shoes are clean. Since interview season takes place in the fall/winter, you will most likely need a coat. Suit coats all look the same, so find one way to distinguish your coat from the others (whether it be a scarf, lapel pin, etc.), otherwise you may find someone else has mistaken your coat as their own at the end of the day!

What to Bring

Here are some suggestions on things to bring to your interview day:

- Copies of your CV
- Copies of supplemental materials that were added to your application later, since many interviewers may not have been aware of Step 2 scores or AOA status updates
- Copies of research papers, you have published that you can give to interviewers who are particularly interested in your work. Printed poster presentation with nice pictures that facilitate explaining your research work. A tablet can also be helpful if several pictures are presented
- Copies of recent eye exam (some programs may check your vision on interview day, but most will ask for this information ahead of time if this is something they are interested in)
- Breath mints
- Blank paper for taking notes

Interview Day Format

Many programs will send you a schedule beforehand, but expect to be there the entire day. There will be some sort of presentation about the program as well as a tour of the facilities. Some programs will also have you attend Grand Rounds or resident education sessions. There are many possible formats for the interviews themselves, but, very commonly, you will rotate between 5-10 different faculty members for 10-20 minute interviews apiece. There may be 1:1 or 2 faculty:1 applicant interviews, occasionally there are also panel interviews (i.e. 1 applicant with multiple faculty members).

At the end of your interview day, assemble your notes about the program and make a “Pro and Con” list about the program. This will especially come in handy when you begin assembling your rank list and all the programs begin to blend together.

The Social Dinners

It is very nice that many programs host dinners the evening before or after the interview for applicants to have further time to talk to residents and, occasionally, faculty. These are often some of the most favorite moments of the interview trail and can give you the best feel for a program. Although not required, it does give the applicant an opportunity to show their commitment to the program. Try to attend as many of these dinners as you can, but, unfortunately, due to the hectic nature of interview season, your travel plans between interviews will often keep you from attending. Remember to be on your best behavior at all points during the interview process, including the social dinners, even if no faculty are present. Programs are looking for ANY sign that you might not be a good fit for their program, and this includes any unprofessional behavior towards the secretaries, residents, or other applicants.

Thank You Notes

There is no consensus about whether to write thank you notes to interviewers. At many programs, the interview committee sits down immediately after the interview day and ranks applicants right then and there while they are still fresh in their mind. Thus, a thank you note will not have any impact on the way you are ranked by that program, nor will telling the program you will rank them highly. However, if you would still like to send a thank you note, ask the program coordinator on interview day or after if they accept thank you notes and whether to send them by mail or email. Some applicants do want to send thank you cards or emails to every interviewer; if this is you, it can be helpful to write down one or two things that you talked about during the interview immediately to help you remember who was who and mention something personalized from the conversation in the thank you.

Travel Tips

Additional advice to minimize stress during interview season and tips for traveling on the dime:

- Travel
 - Drive between interviews to minimize flight expenses. (This could save you hundreds of dollars! But is often not possible due to timing.)
 - Kayak.com is a great website that searches across multiple airlines (except Southwest). You can also try the Google Flights search as well.
 - Consider airline credit cards and saving your miles with the airline so you can receive benefits from all the miles you will rack up. For example, the Delta American

- Express card gives you double miles when you book a Delta flight, allows you to check a bag for free (saves \$50 round trip), as well as priority boarding.
- Check out skiplagged.com for the cheapest one-way flights. Skiplagged helps you find the cheapest option for getting from point A to point B, even if that means you are *technically* booked for a different final destination. Some words of warning: you will not be able to check bags if you use this service (otherwise your bag will end up in a city where you are not!). And, if you use it frequently enough on the same airline, they may catch on and ban you from flying with them. So proceed at your own risk.
 - Getting a rental car (if possible, depending on the city) can be much cheaper than taking Uber/Lyfts everywhere. Bring your own GPS or smartphone; driving in a foreign city is confusing and you can't afford to get lost on the morning of your interview. Additionally, rental car companies charge extra money to use their GPS.
 - Ask your hotel if they have a shuttle service to/from the airport, and to/from the hospital for your interview. Ask the hotel about cabs, sometimes this will get you a discount to use a recommended cab service.
- Lodging
 - Try to book hotels through the same hotel chain and join their rewards account to earn free nights at a hotel.
 - If you book your hotels through hotels.com, once you book 10 hotels (no matter what hotel you book) you will receive one free.
 - Try out AirBnB and stay with local hosts, often for a fraction of the cost of a hotel. You can choose your level of desired privacy (which often corresponds with the price of the lodging) ranging from shared room all the way to private apartment or home. You may even get lucky and stay with a particularly gracious host who is willing to provide breakfast or snacks, show you around the city, or even drive you to your interview!
 - Avoid hotel expenses altogether by staying with family, friends, or using an alumni network to locate someone in the area.
 - Staying organized
 - The Smartphone app *TripIt* is an amazing free tool that automatically organizes your flight, hotel, and rental car itineraries for you.
 - *Microsoft OneNote* is a free note-taking program that can be synced from your computer, iPad, or iPhone via an Internet connection, but allows you to access all your notes offline. It can be a nice way to keep yourself organized with travel plans or your notes on different programs for quick reference prior to (or during down time on) the interview day.
 - And finally...
 - Make friends with other applicants! You will cross paths many times throughout the interviews, so ask around and see if others are going to the same interviews as you. Maybe they'll be interested in sharing a cab or hotel room.

Preparing for the Interview

Practice, practice, practice! All the applicants in ophthalmology have impressive resumes, or USMLE scores, or research experience, etc. The interview is a chance for you to set yourself apart from other applicants. By practicing responses to standard questions, you can become comfortable with the process and lower anxiety for the actual interview day. Anxiety often leads to rambling responses that just look bad. Undoubtedly, you will be asked questions you have not prepared for, but you can recover quickly by framing your answers on responses you rehearsed ahead of time. Remember, be **concise** in your responses.

Faculty advisors can serve as exceptional resources when practicing for interviews. They went through the interview process themselves and may very well serve on the interview committee for your school. Meet with a faculty advisor for 30 minutes to do a mock interview. Use their guidance to help organize your responses. Their input can provide valuable insight into what interviewers are looking with each standard question. You can even meet with faculty advisors outside the field of ophthalmology which might give you a different perspective on how you come across and help you refine your responses.

With all this preparation and as you get through the first few interview days, the interview will start to become second nature to you. It is important to maintain energy and excitement with all your responses, even if the information seems mundane. They want to see that you are excited about ophthalmology and that you will add something unique to their program.

Although preparation is important, it is also imperative that you are genuine. Be yourself. Be friendly. Be comfortable. The interview is as much a chance for you to learn about the program as it is for them to learn about you. You want to find the right fit. Pay close attention to how your interviewers acted during your interview – did they listen to your responses? were they friendly? were they arrogant? did they even read your application? Most interviews will have a couple minutes at the end available for you to ask a question or two about the program. Make sure your questions are appropriate for who you're in the room with; i.e. don't ask about their retina surgical numbers when you are interviewing with a glaucoma specialist.

Rank List

Many factors go into formulating an individual's rank list. There is a great article highlighting the main factors to consider when making your rank list, titled [Ophthalmology Residency Rank List Pearls](#) by Ruben Sanchez. In brief, these are:

- 1) Personal goals
- 2) Family
- 3) Culture of program
- 4) Location
- 5) Program size
- 6) Surgical numbers and clinical variety
- 7) Laser experience for residents
- 8) Call schedule
- 9) Benefits
- 10) Research opportunities.

Some people use their gut instinct and some create algorithms awarding points to programs based on the categories listed above. In the end, only you can decide which programs are the best fit for you. And remember, DO NOT rank any program that you would not be willing to go to.

Match Day

Match day for SF Match applicants typically occurs in mid-January. Here is a rough timeline of what to expect match week:

One week prior to Match day
January 4, 2018, 12pm PST

Ranks lists due

Day before Match day
January 11, 2018

Early that morning, you will receive an email stating YES/NO regarding whether you matched.

One hour later, program directors receive a list of the applicants that matched into their program. The program directors may choose to contact you at any point after they receive the results, and most applicants find out their match results from a phone call or email from their new program director.

Later that morning, your medical school dean's office will receive a list of where applicants from their school matched.

Official Match day
January 12, 2018, 8am PST

Match results are posted to the SF Match website

Resources

Additional Websites/Guides

Applying to Away Rotations: Visiting Student Application Service (VSAS)

<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/vsas/jw>

San Francisco Match (SF Match): <https://www.sfmatch.org/>

UMN Residency/Application Information: <http://www.meded.umn.edu/residency/>

Residency Match Basics for Ophthalmology, American Academy of Ophthalmology:

<http://www.aao.org/careers/envision/residency101.cfm>

Iowa Guide to the Ophthalmology Match:

<http://webeye.ophth.uiowa.edu/eyeforum/tutorials/Iowa-Guide-to-the-Ophthalmology-Match.pdf>

2010 Update to the Nearly Complete "Guide" to Applying for Ophthalmology Residency

https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B7H5dY40lWITNTQwZDVhMmYtNGEzZi00ZDBlLWI0M2UtMzRiNmM2MDhjMzRh/edit?hl=en_US&pli=1

Student Doctor Network Ophthalmology Forums:

<http://forums.studentdoctor.net/forums/ophthalmology-eye-physicians-surgeons.47/>

Scutwork Program Reviews: <http://www.scutwork.com/>

MatchApplicants Program Info: <http://ophthalmology.matchapplicants.com/select.php>

Interview Tips: <http://www.mrcophth.com/interviewsuccess/interview.html>

20 questions about Ophthalmology answered by a practicing Ophthalmologist:

<http://www.studentdoctor.net/2007/04/20-questions-ophthalmology/>

Other Tips on Preparing for Ophthalmology

Volunteering

- Look for community or volunteer opportunities (e.g. the Lions Club, Student Sight Savers/Ophthalmology Interest Group) to get to know both local and University ophthalmologists.

Research

- Do an ophthalmology research rotation during medical school. The sooner and the more time you can spend on this rotation the better.
- Contact several attendings from the department of ophthalmology to find what type of research opportunities exist. Medical students can choose to do basic research or clinical research or both. Please contact the attendings directly.
- Apply for medical student grants.
- It is very important to follow up with the research you did and not to leave it half way done. Attendings get frustrated when you do not to follow up on the opportunity for research that was given to you.

Clerkship

- During the ophthalmology rotation let the attendings, fellows and residents know that you are interested in ophthalmology, so they will try to get to know you more.
- Considering doing an ophthalmology rotation outside your university.
<https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/vsas/jw>
- Attend ophthalmology grand rounds even if you are off the rotation, this way people at the department will remember you easier the day of the interview and will realize that you are really interested in ophthalmology.