



PurposeMD

Understanding the 'Why'
of your career in medicine

A Primer on Interviews

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A Primer on Interviews

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A Primer on Interviews

About Interviews



The Role of the Interview

The interview can be a source of anxiety and stress for some medical students. It can also be a great opportunity for learning and connection. It's all about the way you look at it. How you look at it can go a long way in setting the tone of the interview itself. While you could look at the interview as yet another instance where you're being evaluated, you could also see the positive that you have been selected to be interviewed. It is an opportunity for you to communicate your passion and strengths. It is also an opportunity to learn about a program and connect with a potential future colleague in your discipline of practice. You might think that you still have gaps in your application. Maybe your board scores weren't as high as you liked. Those things are in the past; you still got the interview. You are now sitting with a person who may not know you well, and this is a chance to create a new relationship.

Acing Your Interview

Your performance in interviews overall is a product of your preparation (getting to know your core message intimately) as well as your willingness (and courage) to engage the interviewer. There is an element of interpersonal dynamics involved that is never entirely predictable. Sometimes you will be fully prepared and ready to go, but the interviewer may be having a bad day. Sometimes you will have a bad day. If you feel that an interview didn't go quite the way that you had hoped, shake it off. Don't dwell on things outside of your control. Focus on your preparation and be committed to engaging with the interviewer. If you do these two things, you will most likely be very successful in the interview process.

Preparing for Your Interview

You've put in all this work in medical school, all this work in college, and all this work in high school. You are about to be finished with medical school and will soon be a real doctor. One last step remains, the interviews. Knowing how much work you have put in these last years, would it make sense to "wing it" in the last step? Of course not. Make the preparation you put in to interviewing reflective of the preparation you have put in to the process it took to get to this point. Interviewing could feel like a daunting task. However, this is daunting to other medical students as well. The work you put into preparing for interviews will be "high-yield" time and will help open opportunities to you for the next stage of your training (not to mention that it is a skill that you will need for the rest of your life).

The goal of this guide is to help make the process less mysterious and make your preparation more efficient. The key to success and confidence in interviews is in your preparation!

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The Big Picture



Let's say that you are at a party. Someone who you don't know comes up to you and starts a conversation with you. How long does it take before you form a distinct impression of that person? 30 minutes? No way. More like one minute. 15 seconds. 5 seconds? That's a very important insight when it comes to interviews.

While so many students are preparing their answers to potential interview questions, they are neglecting an even more important part of the interview, which is around the intangibles of interpersonal interactions.

Your ENERGY

Have you ever noticed that when you're happy and you talk with someone who is down, that it begins to drag you down over time? You want to escape. (Likewise, when you talk to someone who is in a more positive state than you, that it begins to lift you?) Your state of being is being communicated to other people. That's what, in the party example, you are picking up on as you talk to the other person. It's not really about the words, but about the energy and the state. So, as you enter interviews, observe your state. Take steps to boost it. Get good sleep. Maintain focus on good thoughts. Meditate. Don't ruminate in you head about how to answer questions... that will just put you in an anxious state, which will be "communicated."

Finding COMMONALITY

Interviews are subjective by nature. Whether you did "well" in an interview is dependent on how well the people in the interview "connected." It's often the case that the "best" interviews are when the interviewer and candidate deviated off the interview template and engaged in an energetic discussion on a side topic that is of mutual interest. What you want to achieve is a *conversational* tone where the interviewer and candidate are having a fun interaction. The easiest way to achieve the conversational tone is to establish a sense of commonality. Within the interview, don't hesitate to ask questions and make observations which may serve as a basis to discover commonality with the interviewer.

Telling Your Authentic STORIES

Human beings are wired to listen to stories. One of the most common errors that candidates make is the failure to tell stories. Often, it is the candidate who could tell the best stories that interviewers remember at the end of the interview day. Candidates should come to interviews armed with plenty of examples (in the form of stories) that he or she should be ready to share. The main strategy about answering interview questions is through examples and stories. What is the best way to ensure success in interviews? Tell a lot of stories!

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The Big Picture (Your Preparation)

For the three aspects of interviewing (Energy, Commonality, and Stories), use the space below to consider how you will incorporate these into your upcoming interviews.

ENERGY

What are three things I will do to maintain high energy prior to the interview?

COMMONALITY

What are three ways I will try to establish commonality with the interviewer?

AUTHENTIC STORIES

What are three stories that are unique to me?

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The Core Message & Branding



The interview is like a press conference. Reporters can ask many different questions, but it is important for the speaker to know the key points that he or she wants to make. The point for the candidate during interviews is not to say that he or she is qualified, but to convey how the candidate is unique among the candidates. Rather than playing “defense” where you are just answering the interviewer’s questions, the candidate is looking to play “offense,” looking for opportunities to insert his or her core message through the questions that are posed by the interviewer.

What the interviewer is looking for

Although the interviewer is posing many questions, he or she is really trying to get at three underlying questions: Does he or she know what the organization/program is about? Will he or she excel at the job? Will he or she make people around him or her better? The last thing that the program wants is to bring on people who can’t *play well with others* or require a lot of *hand-holding*. Knowing these three underlying questions will allow you to make the case at the root of what the interviewer is looking for.

Direction, Competence, and Likeability

The three aspects which correspond to the three underlying questions are “Direction,” “Competence,” and “Likeability.” In the following page, there are three statements under “Direction,” “Competence,” and “Likeability,” respectively, which represent the case you are making about your candidacy. While you are answering many different questions, you are really addressing these nine statements:

Direction

1. *I know where I’m going professionally.*
2. *I’m aligned with something I care about.*
3. *I have a mature and strategic perspective on my career.*

Competence

4. *I am a smart person.*
5. *I can carry out the main tasks of the job competently.*
6. *I am resourceful and I get things done.*

Likeability

7. *You’ll enjoy working with me.*
8. *I work well with others.*
9. *I am a good citizen and am willing to contribute to the common good.*

Knowing your signature strengths

How are you unique? Who are you when you are at your best? Relative to other candidates, where do you excel? Think of three adjectives that describe your uniqueness. Those are your “signature strengths.” That’s what you would bring to the program; that’s why they would choose you. Think of examples to back up each adjective. During the interview, always be looking to interject these signature strengths into your interview response.

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Your Core Message & Branding (Your Preparation)

For each of the three statements under “Direction,” “Competence,” and “Likeability,” think about how you would make the case for yourself in the affirmative for each statement.

DIRECTION

I know where I’m going professionally.

I’m aligned with something I care about.

I have a mature and strategic perspective on my career.

Does he/she know what this organization is about?

COMPETENCE

I am a smart person.

I can carry out the main tasks of the job competently.

I am resourceful and I get things done.

Will he/she excel at the job?

LIKEABILITY

You’ll enjoy working with me.

I work well with others.

I am a good citizen and am willing to contribute to the common good.

Will he/she make people around him/her better?

Signature Strengths: What are three adjectives to describe you at your best? How might others describe the best things about you? In the space below, note three adjectives to reflect your “signature strengths.”

My Signature Strength #1:

My Signature Strength #2:

My Signature Strength #3:

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The Format



Most interviews are “fit” interviews. During a fit interview, you should be prepared to tell convincing and vivid stories about yourself. The questions will focus around your background, your current career intent, and your behavioral characteristics. The key to doing well during the fit interview is to develop a coherent story which synthesizes aspects of your past and behavioral characteristics to justify your current career direction. Be

prepared to support claims you make about yourself in the form of examples. Certain fit interviews may also include a few technical questions.

Introduction / Small Talk

The Standard Interview format

Conventional interviews are between 30 and 60 minutes. Candidates will often interview one-on-one with interviewers in multiple interview sessions.

Fit / Background Questions

Interviews will typically begin with a few minutes of small talk and pleasantries.

Behavioral Questions

Then the interviewer will tend to ask fit questions around the candidate’s motivations and reasons for applying to the program.

Technical / “Pressure” Questions

From there, questions will tend to shift towards behavioral questions aimed at understanding the candidate’s traits and personal character.

Questions for the Interviewer

The interview may also contain some technical questions, and conclude with the candidate asking questions of the interviewer.

Unstructured interviews

When there are many candidates and many interviewers for any given program, interviews will tend to contain standardized questions so that interview sessions can be calibrated. However, residency interviews often deviate from standard (hiring) interview practice. Residency interviews are short (~15 to 30 minutes) and unstructured (the interviewer may not have prepared questions in advance). Certain interviewers may take an unstructured style where the interview is entirely conversational.

A common practice during these unstructured interviews is for the interviewer to look at your CV / ERAS application and start a conversation about that item. They may also say, “what questions do you have for me?” **You will still want to prepare for the full standard interview format because unstructured interviews are just elements of the standard interview format.**

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Small Talk & The First Impression



First impressions matter

Although students spend plenty of time preparing responses to likely interview questions, many neglect this "hidden" but significant side of the interview. The first impression is a function of three main factors: dress/grooming, positive energy, and initial small talk.

A note about dress and grooming

Interview convention dictates that candidates be "clean and well-groomed." Being well-groomed mainly refers to the grooming of hair. Men should have a conservative hair style and no facial hair (mustache, beard) if possible. (Note: beards are becoming more acceptable. If you have one, keep it well-groomed.) Women should have a neat hairstyle. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews are conducted in business formal attire. Students should maintain two or more well-fitting suits for interviewing. Men should avoid jewelry other than a watch and a conservative ring. Women have more leeway with respect to jewelry; typically, stud earrings, necklaces, rings (on hands), and watches are acceptable.

The role of small talk

During the first few minutes of the interview, the interviewer is likely to engage you in small talk. The goal of small talk is to develop a "conversational flow" for the rest of the interview. Save the long, prepared interview responses for later and engage in lighter conversation during the first few minutes of the interview. During the small talk phase, closely observe the interviewer and atune to the energy and posture of the interviewer. Just like building a connection with a patient, you are building the connection to the interviewer. When responding to small talk questions, always put in extra information so that the interviewer has opportunities to follow up and keep the conversation going. Also, notice the environment of the interviewer, you can comment on objects such as pictures or books which may serve as ways to build commonality and rapport.

Small Talk (Your Preparation)

Ways I plan to engage in small talk with the interviewer...

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The Night Before...

Before we continue with talking about the interview structure...

Let's discuss the dinner the night before since that is a time where first impressions, grooming, and small talk are put into action.



Handling Yourself Socially

Often, before the formal interview day, you will be invited for dinner with some people within the department of the program that you are applying to. As you know, this is a part of the interview and is one place where people begin to form first impressions. In these dinners, be prepared to talk a little “shop” mixed in with some personal perspectives.

A few tips

- **Be inclusive.** When talking, include the other candidates sitting at the table in your conversation. Don't talk only to the hosts. It's very clear when candidates are trying to “out do” one another, and it's ugly.
- **It's not about the food.** Eat sparingly and drink sparingly. Don't make it look like you haven't eaten for 10 days. The food is just a prop for good conversation.
- **Ideas for table conversation.**
 - Complimentary observation about the location or food
 - Something about an interesting current event...“Did you hear about...?” (not politics please!)
 - “This reminds me of a time when...(something interesting that happened to you in the past)”
- **Have a few questions ready.** Sometime during the conversation, you will likely find yourself talking one-on-one with one of the hosts. Have a few questions ready for that person. (Please see “Questions for the Interviewer” section on page 16 for ideas.)

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FIT Questions



After some small talk, the interview will tend to transition towards a more formal line of questions. Often, the interviewer will begin by asking the candidate, “Tell me about yourself.” The interviewer could also ask about the candidate’s motivation to go to medical school or

picking a particular specialty. These “fit” questions will tend to occur during the early part of the interview. **(Note: For unstructured interviews, the interviewer might remain in “small talk” mode for the entire interview. You will still want to interject your answers within the conversation.)**

What They’re Trying to Assess

The interviewer is trying to understand the candidate’s maturity of thought regarding choosing a professional path. Does the candidate have a well-considered reason for making the choices which have led him or her to be interviewing here today? Also, the interviewer is trying to get a sense of whether the candidate really wants to train at the interviewer’s program.

Potential Questions

- “Tell me about yourself”
- “Why medicine?”
- “Why this specialty?”
- “Why this program?”
- “What is your career goal?”
- “Tell me about (something on your CV)”
- “What are your interests outside of medicine?”
- “If you won the lottery and didn’t have to work anymore, what would you do?”

General Strategies

All students should prepare an overarching narrative (~ 3 minutes long), which is referred to as the “**odyssey**” which covers their professional journey from their past, present, to the future. The end of the odyssey should tie in to why the candidate would be a good fit at the place that he or she is interviewing with. The odyssey encompasses many of the sub-narratives such as the reason for going to med school, or choice of specialty.



However, one can only highlight a few key points in a 3-minute odyssey. So, pick only 2 or 3 things per phase (past, present, future). Don’t go on to “list” activities. It’s more important to talk about the “why” of decisions and actions more than to go into the “what” of activities in your odyssey.

When encountering the first fit question, look to tell your odyssey to lay out the overall narrative of your career.

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FIT Questions (Your Preparation)

In the space below, construct the key elements of your odyssey. There are three phases of the odyssey, and each phase should take about a minute of response time. Then reflect on questions related to sub-narratives such as “Why medicine?”

 Past	Present	Future 
<p>What were you interests as a kid? Most formative experience Who do you most admire? Why Medicine?</p> <p>Three unique and memorable things about your past which shaped the person you are now. (values & strengths)</p>	<p>What do you think of your school? Why did you decide to do (something on your CV)? Why this specialty?</p> <p>Three significant things while in school: activities / accomplishments / leadership. (focus on the why and not just on listing)</p>	<p>Why this program? Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Describe your dream job</p> <p>Discuss choice of specialty. Discuss your future goals. Discuss the attractiveness of the program.</p>
<p>Why medicine?</p>	<p>Why this specialty?</p>	<p>Why this program?</p>
<p>What do you love to talk about?</p>	<p>What activities are meaningful to you?</p>	<p>What do you hope to accomplish?</p>

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BEHAVIORAL Questions



Most interview questions are behavioral questions. They come in many shapes and sizes, but they all are trying to understand your character traits.

What They're Trying to Assess

Each job has a set of traits that programs are seeking in candidates. Such traits may include leadership, integrity, analytical ability, creativity, and so on. Interviewers use behavioral questions to assess the candidate's aptitude in a set of traits. No matter what the form of the question, figure out what trait or characteristic of you that question is trying to assess, and respond using your prepared examples.

Potential Questions

- "What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?"
- "What makes you different from the other candidates I'll see today?"
- "Tell me about a time when you faced an ethical dilemma."
- "What is the biggest mistake you have made?"
- "What was the hardest decision you've ever had to make?"
- "Tell me about a difficult patient encounter"
- "How would your classmates describe you?"
- "What kind of people frustrate you?"
- "Who do you admire? Why?"
- "What do you think is more important, intelligence or hard work?"
- "Describe a time when you had to convince someone to your point of view."

General Strategies

A well-told anecdote (about 2-minutes long) in the Context-Action-Result (CAR) format makes for the most effective response to behavioral questions. As part of your preparation for behavioral questions, you should develop and rehearse a number of examples in the CAR format that you can draw upon during the interview. We recommend that students prepare at least 10 to 15 examples in various situations (adversity, leadership, teamwork, etc.). You should pay particular attention to anecdotes relating to your signature strengths and try to work those anecdotes into your responses to behavioral questions.

The **Context-Action-Result** format (~2 minutes long)

Context

What was the situation?

Action

What did you do?

Result

What happened?
What did you learn?

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BEHAVIORAL Questions (Your Preparation)

Take an inventory of the examples you can cite relating to the traits listed on the left-hand column. Develop each example into an anecdote in the CAR format. Be sure to have the majority of the anecdotes be relevant to professional situations.

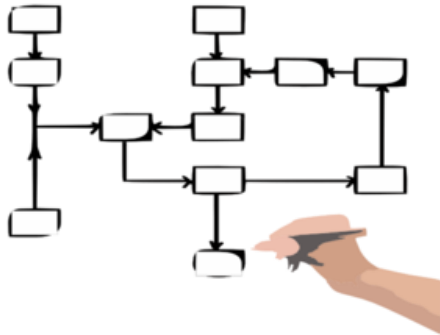
	Anecdote #1	Anecdote #2
Strength		
Weakness	What is the opposite of your strength?	What is the opposite of your strength?
Creativity		
Conflict		
Teamwork		
Leadership		
Crisis		
Fun		
Analysis		
Ethics		
Setback		

Think also about:

My favorite book / author	My favorite TV show	My favorite movie
My favorite hobby	My favorite place	My favorite food
A person I admire	A Joke you can tell	Your personal hashtag (#)

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TECHNICAL & PRESSURE Questions



Technical questions test the relevant knowledge of the candidate and/or the ability of the candidate to use the appropriate analytical processes for a given situation. Although fit and behavioral questions will be the bulk of the questions, it is often the technical questions which lead to the most interesting conversations during an interview. These questions are generally presented as a discussion on a relevant topic within the specialty or healthcare in general. The questions could also be posed as scenarios where you will need to talk through an issue (e.g. a patient scenario) through

a disciplined, logical framework. If there are items on your CV which are technical in nature, you should also be prepared to describe the process of that activity through a technical lens (e.g. research). **(Note: technical questions are rarer, but if you integrate a technical answer into your interview by showing your engagement and thoughtfulness about a professionally relevant topic, this is a nice way to distinguish yourself.)**

What They're Trying to Assess

Through technical questions, the interviewer can get a sense of whether the candidate is interested in, thinks like, and talks like "one of us." Each discipline has a set of issues that only people in the discipline understand, and a lingo that only insiders understand. This is your chance to show that you "belong." Unlike fit or behavioral questions which are "softer," technical questions call upon you to demonstrate your knowledge and your ability to think through an issue.

Potential Questions

Many interviews don't even include formal technical questions. However, you should be prepared to "talk shop" about issues relevant to the discipline.

- "What do you think about (relevant healthcare / specialty topic)?"
- "Describe what you did for (something on your CV)."
- "What is the topic in medicine/healthcare (or in discipline) that most interests you? Why?"
- "If you encountered the following patient scenario, talk me through what you would do?"
- "If you wanted to know more about (a topic) how would you go about finding out more?"
- "Tell me a joke."

General Strategies

What is most fascinating to you about things going on in the discipline? What can you talk endlessly about? Interviewers want to see that there are things in the discipline that you are passionate about. Try to work those topics of interest into the conversation. You will need to identify what they are and do some background research to be able to hold a conversation on them. If you are asked a formal technical question (e.g. a scenario question), think about the logical frameworks of thinking for your discipline and answer using those frameworks in a structured way.

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TECHNICAL & PRESSURE Questions (Your Preparation)

Preparing for technical questions requires research into relevant topics related to the discipline/specialty, the organization/program that you are applying to, and to the relevant logical frameworks for the discipline.

Notes & Research on CURRENT EVENTS

- Know what's going on in your specialty
- What topics/developments in the specialty are most fascinating to you?
- Think about your opinions on key issues

Notes & Research on ORGANIZATION

- Know the key initiatives of the organization
- Know about key leaders of the organization
- Know or inquire about the key initiatives of the unit

Notes & Research on SCENARIOS

- Crisis scenario
- Clinical reasoning scenario
- Analytical scenario

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QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER



At the end of the interview, the interviewer may ask whether you have questions for him or her. Make sure you ask some thoughtful questions because asking questions shows your interest and engagement. Try to avoid questions that are easily researched, that may put the interviewer or program in a negative light, or that are purely logistical in nature (e.g. parking, vacation, etc.). Rather, ask questions that show an engagement and interest with the job itself. Also, it may be good to begin by asking questions of the interviewer about his or her own experiences and opinions.

Even though the most common time to ask your questions is at the end of the interview, it is often good to sprinkle questions within the body of the interview to create a conversational tone.

What They're Trying to Assess

They are trying to gauge your level of interest in them. So, a thoughtful question that shows investment of time conveys a positive interest (as well as the maturity of your thought processes). However, don't just ask clever questions for the sake of asking clever questions. The thoughtfulness/cleverness needs to be balanced with the fact that you should be genuinely interested in the answers themselves. Also, asking thoughtful questions in a timely manner shows social acuity and gives the interview better conversational tone and flow.

Potential Questions (For the Interviewer)

It is often easier to begin questions by engaging the interviewer's own experiences and opinions. Avoid questions which may put the interviewer or the program in a negative light.

- "How long have you been with (organization)?"
- "What do you like best about working at (organization)?"
- "What do you notice about the type of people that tend to succeed at (organization)?"
- "What are the key initiatives to the program?"
- "I'm curious about your opinion on (current hot topic in specialty)"
- "I was really interested to know more about (initiative of the organization / program)?"

General Strategies

You should prepare to have some questions in your "back pocket" and be prepared to ask at least three questions during the interview. The questions are typically aligned with: the background of the interviewer, the organization/program, or topics within the specialty/discipline. You don't have to wait until the end of the interview to ask questions. You should also feel free to ask spontaneous questions about topics which are of mutual interest during the body of the interview.

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QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER (Your Preparation)

For the three categories of questions for the interviewer below, prepare three questions that you might ask. Find opportunities to ask some of these questions, and feel free to ask questions spontaneously based on the situation.

Questions relating to the background of the INTERVIEWER:

Questions relating to the ORGANIZATION / PROGRAM:

Questions relating to the SPECIALTY / DISCIPLINE:

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Recognizing Question Types



Thousands of questions, but only 3 types

Although there may be thousands of different questions, there are only three types of questions. There are **fit questions** which seek to assess your motivation and professional direction. There are **behavioral questions** which seek to assess your character and personality. Then there are **technical questions** which seek to assess your knowledge and ability within a certain discipline.

Is it better to review hundreds of questions and how to answer each of them, or is it better to recognize the question type and answer the question appropriate to the question type? I think you'll find the latter approach to be more time-efficient and cohesive towards your core messaging.

3 types of questions

Your job during the interview is to recognize which of the three types of questions it is and use the right method to answer them, while reinforcing your core message. In the table below, there are the three types of questions and the general approach to answer each question type:

	Example	What it's trying to assess	How to approach
FIT Questions	What do you like most about our program?	Whether you have a well-thought out reason for your professional choices	Know your narrative, communicate your narrative focusing on the "why"
BEHAVIORAL Questions	How do you define being "a good doctor?"	What kind of person are you and how you will respond to some expected situations	Know your strengths, tell anecdotes in the CAR format
TECHNICAL Questions	What is the biggest challenge facing our specialty?	Whether you have the background knowledge and whether you can think and communicate clearly	Do your background research, be prepared to hold a thoughtful discussion on a topic

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After the Interview

Send genuine communication (email) of appreciation

After your interview, you're probably wondering whether you should follow up with either an email or a hand-written note. It is good practice to do that, but just realize that interviewers are likely to be bombarded with such notes and that the note itself isn't likely to be a high-yield action.



If you do decide to follow up, an email is most likely fine. You can still send written notes, and that was more common practice back when, but these days, it is not required. In writing the notes, don't send form letters. Readers know when they are receiving spam. Take the time to customize the note. The note doesn't have to be long, but express something authentic about the program that you are interested in or something you had discussed of common interest during the interview.

For more information about post-interview process

Visit: <https://purposemd.org/pain-points/how-do-i-navigate-the-process-after-interviews/>

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Your Interview CHECKLIST

Good preparation is the key to acing your interview. As you are planning your interview, look at the list below. Have you done the following things?

- Do you have a good interview outfit? (Are you sure? Did someone with good “fashion sense” approve?)
- Do you have your “core message” developed? (page 5)
- Have you done your homework to research the organization, unit, and interviewer (if possible)?
- Have you thought about what small talk you might make?
- Do you have a well-rehearsed 3-minute Odyssey?
- Do you have 10+ well-prepared anecdotes to answer behavioral questions?
- Do you know what's going on in the field/specialty?
- Do you have at least 3 well-considered questions for the interviewer?
- Have you rehearsed the interview with a classmate? 5 times? 10 times?
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

"One important key to success is self-confidence. An important key to self-confidence is preparation." Arthur Ashe