

Communication Before, During, and After the Interview

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"Communication leads to community, that is, to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing." - Rollo May

"To hold a pen is to be at war" - Voltaire

Communication with residency programs can be one of the most confusing and anxiety-provoking topics related to the application process. It is to the applicant's advantage to consider the timing and type of communication they might employ to build their familiarity and relationship with a given program, both for defining the applicant's preferences and for increasing the applicant's visibility.

Before the interview

While programs begin reviewing ERAS applications in late September, there is no reason why communication with programs must wait until the application is submitted. Furthermore, pre-application communication can be an effective way to draw attention to your application ahead of its review, increasing the likelihood of its prioritization. Such communication can take the form of "cold calling" or attendance at open houses, discussed below.

"Cold calling"

"Cold calling" refers to making unsolicited contact with programs. This can be an effective way of gaining information about a program prior to deciding whether to apply and understanding how to customize the personal statement, while also indicating an early, specific interest to the program. You should include an educated question about the program and demonstrate full use of the publicly available materials on the program website. Such emails should include your CV, as program directors often like to see such information as they get to know you. An example of a cold call email could be:

Subject: Residency program information

Dear [Program director],

I am applying for pathology residency in the upcoming cycle. I am specifically interested in your program because [**indicate why: geography, strength in a field of interest, program size or setting, relationship with current or past residents**].

I would like to learn more about the program and especially about the [e.g. *cytopathology*] training, and would appreciate it if someone would be able to discuss it with me more ahead of application season. I have found the website very useful but have more questions to ask!

Please find my C.V. attached for your review.

Thank you,

Andrew Leader,

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Pitfalls of cold calls

While cold calls are often warmly received, writers can be at risk of seeming overeager, desperate, or vague. Avoid statements like: “Your program is already my top choice and I want to sign up now”; “I have applied to the match 3 times already, but I think now is my chance”, “I am highly interested in your program” [without justification]. Such expressions may trigger doubts about your genuine interest or qualification and may increase the risk of having your email relegated to the trash folder.

Open houses

Open houses provide an opportunity for programs to distribute information publicly and efficiently about what makes their program unique. They are usually held over zoom, and consist of a short presentation followed by a question and answer session with the program director and current residents. They are held in the fall, occurring around the time that applicants are submitting to ERAS, and are often announced through the programs’ social media accounts, such as in the tweet below:



Note that you can also inquire about open house dates when making a cold call (see above).

While attendance at an open house can be viewed as an indication of interest and may therefore increase the likelihood of selection for interview, the interactions with applicants are largely non-evaluative, and serve almost exclusively for the purpose of providing applicants with information for their own use. However, each interaction with a program can make an impression, so it is highly advisable to turn your zoom camera on, dress neatly (though formal dress is not required whatsoever) and have a neat (or professional, virtual) background, and be actively engaged during the question-and-answer session.

After applying, before the interview offer

When it starts to become later in the interview season (November and December), and you haven't heard from a program you are interested in, it is advisable to reach out to the program and indicate your continued interest. Interviews are offered based on a combination of factors related both to the merit of the application and the program's estimated likelihood of the applicant ranking them highly. By making this additional contact and expressing a special interest, it is possible to increase the program's estimation of the latter. This communication should be brief, can summarize some major strengths of your application as well as any important updates to your C.V., and should justify your specific interest in the program. You can reach out via email to the contact specified for the program in the MyERAS portal, and should include a copy of your ERAS application. It might look as follows:

Subject: Requesting residency interview

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to appeal to the Pathology Residency program leadership for the opportunity to interview at [*program name*].

I believe I am a competitive applicant given my multiple pathology-related publications and experiences related to pathology clinical practice. I would also like to update you that my recent article was just published: [*citation*].

Furthermore, I have experience living in [*The program's city*] during a month-long clinical observership and know that I would be very happy and comfortable moving there during residency. I therefore believe that [*program name*] could be an incredible match and would very much like the opportunity to interview with you.

Please see my ERAS packet, attached.

Thanks for your consideration,

Andrew Leader

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As with cold call emails, it is to the benefit of the applicant to be as specific as possible in demonstrating their interest, so as to show the program that their interest is genuine and their process of considering programs has been thoughtful.

During the interview

Congratulations! You have been invited to an interview with your top choice program. Your work is not done yet, however: you must prepare to make sure you are as impressive over Zoom as you are on paper. Aside from the content of your ERAS application, your performance during the faculty interviews is the number-one factor contributing to how programs will actually rank you. For most, such interviews feel very difficult and provoke intense dread. Appropriate preparation is the most effective way to combat negative feelings on interview day and to make the best impression possible.

The structure of the interview day

Interview sessions take up about a half-day with scheduled breaks, so you should prepare snacks and beverages accordingly. You will generally receive your list of faculty interviewers at least 24 hours ahead of time, and will have roughly 25 minutes each to speak with 4-5 different interviewers. Some interview days may include informational presentations from the program director similar to those given during open houses. Most programs will offer additional sessions during which the applicant can interact with current residents, either during the interview day or during an evening on a nearby date. While the resident sessions are meant to be less formal and are usually non-evaluative in that residents do not report back to the program director with a score on your interaction, you should still think of them as part of the interview, and remain aware that these interactions may impact a program's ultimate impression of you.

My tips for interview day

1. Be on time! It is very unprofessional to be late to an interview
2. Ensure that you will have a quality interview venue, meaning:
 - a. Ensure a strong internet connection.
 - b. Check your hardware, and make sure that your sound, microphone, and camera are working.
 - c. Make sure your environment is free from noise and distractions (*e.g. I have a dog at home who barks when people walk by– I therefore reserved space in my medical school in which to conduct my virtual interviews*)
 - d. Make sure your environment is neat. Virtual backgrounds are generally frowned upon in interviews (but are acceptable if you really have no alternative!)
 - e. Make sure your face is well lit. You don't need to purchase a special new lamp, but it could help to orient yourself so that you are facing a well-lit window, for instance.
3. Make sure your appearance is professional:

- a. Applicants are expected to be dressed in business attire (suit and tie for a male-presenting applicant, suit or nice blouse for female-presenting, something equally formal for anyone who is gender non-binary).
 - b. Facial hair is expected to be shaved or neatly groomed as your personal customs permit.
 - c. Hair is expected to be neatly groomed. Religious headwear is always accepted.
4. Look up your interviewers in advance. Know a little bit about their area of expertise, and have 1-2 questions about their interests prepared ahead.
5. Have 5 questions about the program prepared for when you are asked, “do you have any questions for me?” Note that you can ask multiple interviewers the same question! I recommend having backup questions in case they answer your questions ahead of time during the course of conversation.
6. Practice your answers to the following questions:
 - a. Tell me about yourself.
 - b. Why are you applying into Pathology?
 - c. What type of career would you like within Pathology?
 - d. What are you looking for in a residency program?
 - e. What would you bring into our residency program?
 - f. Finally, review and practice answering some common behavioral interview questions (e.g. Tell me about a time you made a mistake? Tell me a time you used your leadership skills? Others are listed [here](#)).
7. Review your ERAS application and be ready to talk about every single detail that you have written.

While people sometimes sadly visualize being subject to interview questions as being barraged by a firing squad, I would recommend to think of it very differently, rather like a collaborative back-and-forth, such as the conversation that ensues while two people are cooking a new dish together. For example, the following conversational devices are fair game:

- After you answer a question, continue on to ask a related question of the interviewer.
- Answer a question with a short, illustrative story, as long as it ultimately makes sense and answers the question clearly.

It is particularly important to avoid giving memorized robot-like responses. Rather than preparing scripted answers, try generating a mental outline for your answer points to guide a more naturally flowing conversation.

Interviewing is a skill that comes with practice, more naturally for some than others, and applicants who lack native-level fluency in English are at an inherent disadvantage. Practicing by oneself or with a partner under contrived circumstances is extremely difficult, but seems to me to be the only way to properly prepare oneself for interview day.

After the interview

By the end of the formal interview, programs already have the vast majority of the information that will be used to rank you. The actual effect of post-interview communication on the way

applicants and programs rank each other is not entirely clear—a thorough discussion can be found [here](#). Below, I offer some guidance on how to best engage in such contact from the applicant side, should you choose to.

The next 24 hours

My recommendation is to send a brief thank you email to every faculty with whom you interact. It may have a negligible effect with respect to your success as an applicant, but it is always considered polite, especially considering that the interviewing faculty are generally volunteering their time. Here is an example:

Dear Dr. Name,
Thank you for participating in my interview process yesterday. I particularly enjoyed our conversation about [*some specific topic of conversation you covered*]. Overall, I had a great time interacting with the residents and other faculty, and got a wonderful impression of your program.
Thanks again,
Andrew

“Second look” meetings

The “Second look” refers to a subsequent visit after the interview for applicants and programs seriously considering each other back when in-person visits were the norm. Here, I use the term to group together all additional conversations related to your exposure to the program. These interactions are usually focused around specific elements of the program, such as clinical specialty interests, research interests, or resident life. For example, I arranged second look meetings with potential research mentors, with thoracic pathologists, and with residents who could speak to what it is like being a parent during residency. Such meetings may be offered to you directly, or you can request to have these meetings arranged through the program director, program coordinator, or other relevant faculty.

As with other interactions outside the formal interview, second look conversations are generally non-evaluative, but can continue to shape the program’s overall impression of you, so a professional level of engagement and interaction is expected. These meetings should be arranged through program leadership (and not “off-line”) so that the program director is aware you are having these meetings, as they demonstrate continued interest. While these meetings are never mandatory for achieving favorable ranking, I personally believe that engaging in them is viewed quite favorably by program leadership.

“Letters of intent” and “Letters of interest” from applicants

As soon as you have solidified your rank list, it is advisable to notify your top programs so that they are reminded of your serious attraction to their program and can appropriately factor this information into their ranking. There are multiple great guides available on how to actually

structure such communication (<https://www.shemmassianconsulting.com/blog/letter-of-intent-residency>, <https://mededits.com/residency-letter-of-intent/residency-letter-of-intent-example/>, <https://bemoacademicconsulting.com/blog/residency-letter-of-intent>, <https://career.ucsf.edu/sites/g/files/tksra2771/f/PharmacyDissectedResidencyLetterofIntentSample.pdf>).

A few key points that I want to hammer home about these:

1. If you indicate to a program that you are ranking them #1, mean it, and follow through. Don't tell this to a program if you are not ready to. Your integrity is at stake! Lying in this instance can have serious repercussions that I would rather not think about. For all other programs, say that you plan to rank them "very highly."
2. Request a confirmation from the program director that they have received your email. I made the mistake of neglecting to do this when sending my letter of intent, and found out a month later that my email went to spam after the program director followed up with me on their own.

"Love letters" from programs

Programs may reach out to applicants at various times after the interview season in order to further recruit or provide additional information. Usually, these communications will include an expression of enthusiasm around the applicant's candidacy. Emails in December and early January will likely come with an offer of providing ways to answer any outstanding questions for the applicant or even propose some "second look" interactions that can be scheduled.

Programs usually do not finalize their rank order of applicants until late January or early February. At this time, they sometimes reach out directly to the candidates who have achieved the top tier of their rankings such that they would be guaranteed to match if the candidate ranks them #1 (i.e. if there are 3 positions available, the candidate has achieved a rank of 1, 2, or 3). In NRMP Match lingo, this applicant has been "ranked to match" by the program. Any other positive language around an applicant's candidacy that does not include the term "rank to match" cannot be considered a guarantee of a match.

Social media, and other miscellaneous acts of communication

Physicians often delete or obscure their social media presence for the sake of their own privacy. Similarly, residency applicants often remove or alter their social media accounts to prevent residency programs from having a view into their personal lives. To the contrary, social media has been adopted quite readily by a large number of pathologists, who are generally free from close personal contact with patients and are eager to connect and learn from each other online. Social media provides an informal medium through which applicants and trainees are able to learn about interesting cases, network with more senior members of the field, and even learn about residency programs and other opportunities. As with any form of public communication, participants should be generally cautious about what personal information they make public, as well as thoughtful and reflective of any statements they make or information they spread online.

Summary

While the advent of remote interviews has limited face-to-face interactions, increased digital communication can be employed to make up for the lack of and even exceed some functions of traditional visits. Such contact can enhance applicants' knowledge of programs in multiple dimensions and can also work to increase applicants' visibility to programs by demonstrating their sustained interest and ability to ask informed questions. Engaging in active and professional communication can furthermore signal to programs a high degree of engagement and professionalism, two qualities that are valued in residents but may be incompletely evaluated during the interview alone.

As you can see from the example emails provided above, some of these communications can be formulaic, but only to an extent. Rather, they must certainly be thoughtful and genuine. For the applicant and program who will be successfully matched to one another, the communication throughout the application process represents the early stages of an intimate relationship that will continue throughout residency and beyond.