

Preparing for Couples Match Applications

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Having gone through the process myself, I am really passionate about helping other couples in the match and wanted to share what I learned, in the hopes that it's useful. It is a stressful process, but I am very grateful to have had the option to match as a couple with my husband.

First, a couple of disclaimers: these are my personal opinions and experiences and do not reflect the opinions of my employer. Additionally, I use heteronormative language in my examples because I am talking about my own situation, but wholeheartedly support all couples in the match regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Pre-Couples Match Conversations

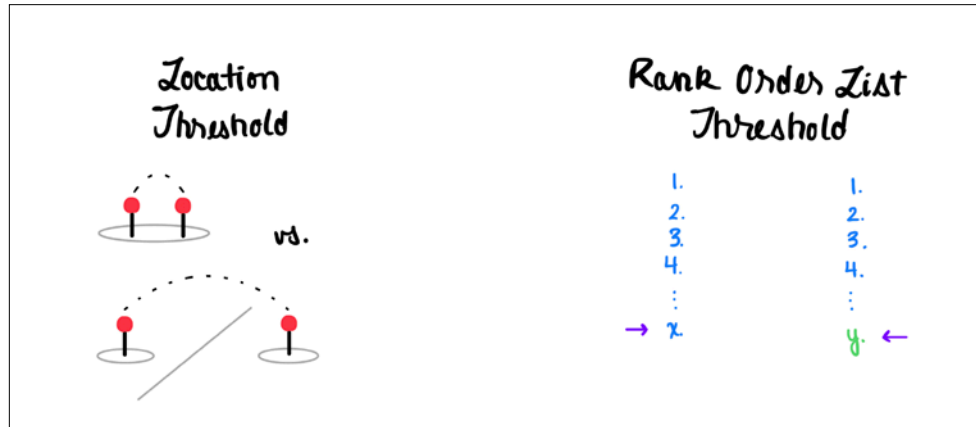
Congratulations on committing to medicine and to your other half! Since matching as a couple involves optimizing for two people, open and honest communication is absolutely essential. Sit down with your partner, uninterrupted, to have frank conversations about your preferences in a residency program (e.g., academic or community, program size and location, etc.) and your goals for residency. This is especially important if your partner is matching into a different specialty. Take the time to explain important factors to consider in a pathology program (such as availability of fellowships), recognizing that other specialties may not have the same emphases.

Deciding Where to Apply

When considering which programs to apply to, we used the website medmap.io to look for cities or areas that had programs for both of us in close proximity. You can also ask your mentors for advice, reach out to residents on social media (especially if they have couples matched!), and look for programs that have fellowships in your areas of interest. We found it helpful to especially consider large cities, which tend to have multiple residency programs and therefore more options for couples (... and then we matched to a fantastic program in a small town, so don't discount those either!).

Finances of Couples Match

Recognize that because you are optimizing for two people, **you will need to apply to more programs than your peers who are matching singly**. I would not presume to tell you a specific number (since that will depend on many factors, such as pathology experience, grades, test scores, and the rest of your application), but just know that it will likely be higher than others who are not in the couples match. Along with this, also keep in mind the financial aspect of the couples match. Matching as a



couple has an added fee of \$90, in addition to higher application fees due to an increased number of ranks.

Important Discussion Points

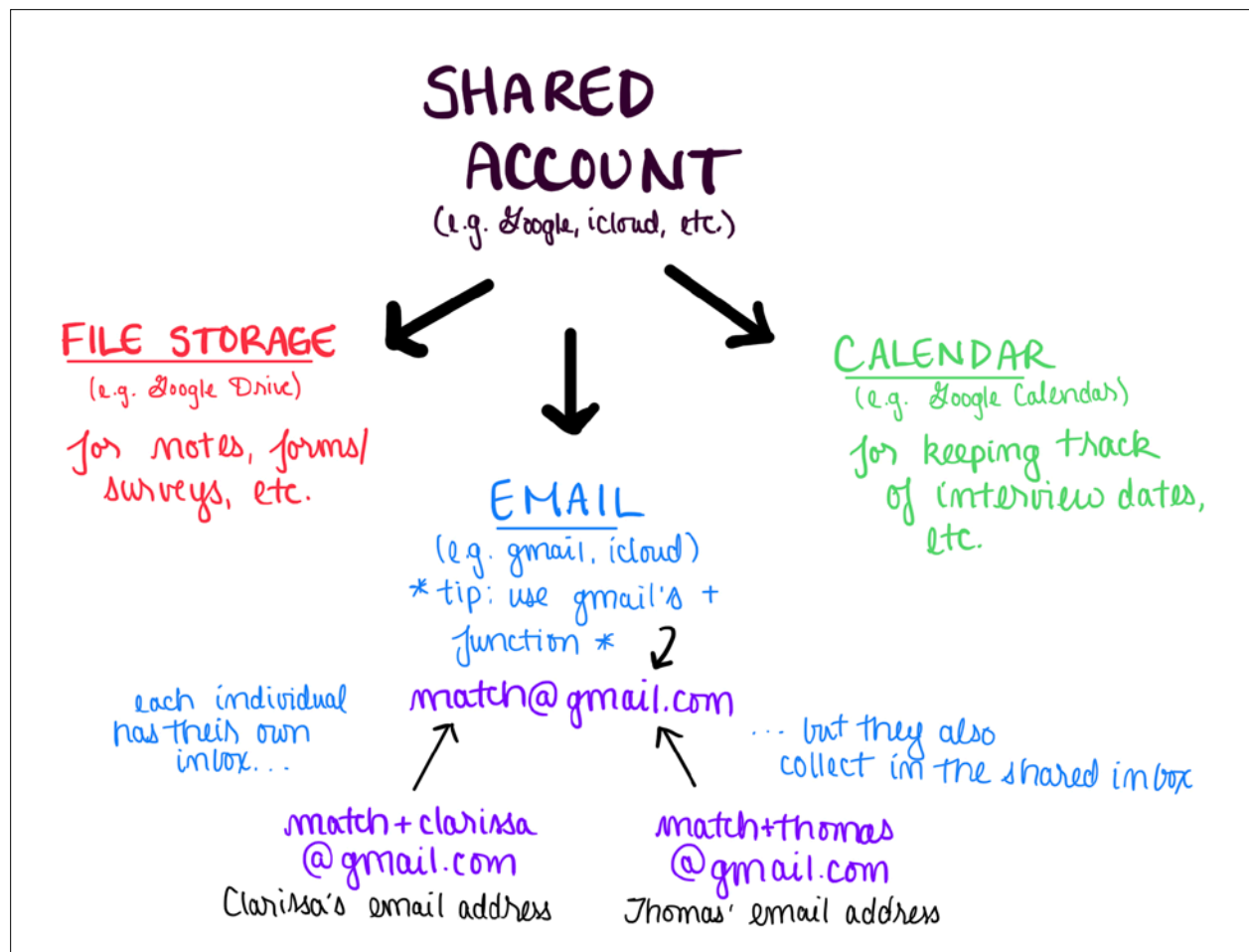
Two things in particular that I think are good to discuss before applying for the couples match are what I call the **location threshold** and the **rank order list threshold**.

The **location threshold** essentially describes the maximum distance between programs ranked together, i.e., how far away can you tolerate living away from each other? Some questions you can ask yourselves to determine your location threshold include:

- Can you accept the possibility of living apart?
- How many hours would you be willing to travel by car, bus or train?
- How about a direct flight, or flights requiring layovers?

There are no right answers, and this is different for every couple depending on your personal preferences, competitiveness of the match, etc. Your location threshold will be useful in determining where to apply, but even more so in accepting/attending interviews and in creating your rank order list.

The **rank order list threshold** refers to the number of programs you will rank together (i.e, within an ideal geographic location) before you start ranking apart. Again, this is highly dependent on each couple, your relationship, and personal preferences. I know one couple that decided to rank a few programs together at the top of their rank list and then rank by their own individual preference after that; other couples decide to agree on each and every rank together. While you will not yet know how many or which programs you will have available to rank, I think having a conversation about your rank order list threshold up front is part of open and honest communication.



Setting Up Logistics

The residency interview season and match process can be overwhelming at times (especially as a couple), but I believe you can use technology to make things easier for yourselves by keeping things organized, efficient, and frictionless.

One of the great things about the couples match is that you have another person in your corner who intimately understands the residency application process. My husband and I found it helpful to set up a shared calendar and email to help coordinate our interviews, respond to the other person's interview invitations when they were busy on a rotation, and keep track of programs in the running.

Email

First, we created a new Google account (which comes with an email address, calendar, and file storage). Even though it is technically one email, you can get two addresses out of it with the "Gmail+" trick. This gives each applicant their *own* separate address, with options for separate inboxes, while maintaining one centralized account.

For example, my email could be match+Clarissa@gmail.com, while my husband's could be match+Thomas@gmail.com. That way, each of us has a separate email address for applications, but all of our emails can be viewed and processed in match@gmail.com's inbox (as well as in our own separate inboxes).

Surveys

After many interviews, applicants often find it difficult to remember details of programs. To help with this, you can make a Google Form to keep track of your thoughts and impressions during interview season. Essentially, make a survey for yourself with topics/questions you think are important, and fill it out after each interview. For example, in my survey with my husband, we had three separate sections: a general section (e.g., *Would residents choose this program again?*), a pathology section (e.g., *What is the grossing/sign-out schedule at this program?*), and an emergency medicine section (e.g., *Are shifts 8, 10, or 12 hours?*). The answers automatically go into a spreadsheet that you can review later with your partner.

Making surveys for yourselves with some standard questions will help you more objectively compare programs together. This is even more vital for couples, especially since you are likely not going to be interviewing at the same programs at the same time.

Preparing for Invitations and Interviews

One important mindset that we had going into the couples match was not being afraid to advocate for each other. I mentioned that I was couples matching in all my interview acceptance emails and during all my interviews. I think this is essential for a few reasons:

- They're not just your partner in the match, but the love of your life (enough said!)

- The match process can be logistically challenging, and couples matching even more so. I found it best to let programs know you are couples matching ahead of time, in case unexpected situations come up. For instance, you may need to cancel interviews you were really looking forward to because your partner was rejected.
- In some cases, programs may be willing to communicate with your partner's program at the same institution. This definitely came in handy for my husband and me during in-person interviews when we could schedule trips together, but obviously this type of communication is helpful during virtual interview seasons as well!

How does advocating for your partner look in practice? When accepting an interview invitation via email, use the opportunity to bring up that you are matching as a couple. For easy reference, I also included the following information:

- Partner's name and AAMC ID
- Partner's intended specialty
- Program coordinator contact information (if partner's program is at the same institution)

This approach could also be applied to your personal statement, where you can explicitly mention you are couples matching and include your significant other's name, AAMC ID, and intended specialty. While not all programs will communicate with your partner's program, some will, and providing this information makes it easier for them to get in touch if they so choose. Don't be disappointed if a program doesn't do this, but I was always impressed by programs that did because I felt it showed they truly cared about me and my happiness during residency.

The NRMP Couples Match Algorithm

It is also important to understand the general process behind the couples match algorithm. The match for couples is very similar to the regular match, but instead of single programs, each rank is made up of a *pair* of ranks, and all three parties have to be ranked high enough on each other's lists for a match to succeed. Here are some important facts about the couples match algorithm to know when making your rank list:

- A rank order pair can consist of programs at the same institution, or programs at different institutions (e.g., *Mayo Clinic Pathology and Mayo Clinic Emergency Medicine* and *Johns Hopkins Pathology and University of Maryland Emergency Medicine* are both valid rank order pairs).
- If you list two different institutions in the same rank order pair, they do not need to both be in the same city (this is where your location threshold comes into consideration).
- A program can be ranked multiple times on each partner's list, but you cannot list duplicates of the same pair (e.g., *Mayo Clinic Pathology and Mayo Clinic Emergency Medicine* can be

listed with *Mayo Clinic Pathology and Hennepin Emergency Medicine*, but both Mayo Clinic programs can't be listed again.

- A special case for couples is the possibility of No Match – that is, one partner matches at a program, while the other goes unmatched. Use this option only at the bottom of your rank list!
- You can list up to 300 rank order pairs. Both partners need the same number of rank order listings to create valid pairs. My advice is to make a lot of combinations; your rank order list will be much longer than any of your peers who are matching singly.

Please see the linked YouTube video for an excellent explanation of the Couples Match algorithm from the NRMP: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2aJKrzYK8k>

The couples match is a stressful process, but I believe that preparing in advance of the application season by having conversations with your partner, setting up logistics, and getting into the right frame of mind is highly beneficial. I wish you both best of luck in the couples match, and please feel free to reach out to me or others at Match to Path with any questions!

Clarissa E. Jordan, MD is an Anatomic and Clinical Pathology resident at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, with interests in hematopathology, dermatopathology, molecular genetic pathology, and informatics. She participated in the couples match with her husband, an Emergency Medicine resident at Mayo Clinic. Clarissa is passionate about pathology pipeline efforts and helping other couples succeed in the match. She can be found on Twitter at [@pathcejmd](https://twitter.com/pathcejmd).