

The Iowa Guide to the Ophthalmology Match

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Overview

Ophthalmology is an incredibly fascinating and rewarding field. It offers a distinctive combination of medical and surgical management while utilizing amazing technological devices to maintain and restore vision. Because many consider vision the most prized of the senses, ophthalmologists can make a tremendous impact on the lives of their patients. The ophthalmology application and match process is fairly unique, in that it is coordinated by the San Francisco Matching Program rather than the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) like most other specialties. As a result, the field has its own Match Day and application deadlines. It is a huge relief to match months before your peers, but having a separate application process can make the process extremely confusing. Unfortunately, there is no consolidated source of information for the ophthalmology match. While preparing my own application, I gathered information from peers, residents, faculty, websites, and books. This guide attempts to consolidate the most important of this information in hopes that it will make your life easier during your preparation, application process, and interviews.

Ophthalmology is a competitive specialty, although less so than it has been in the past. In 2015, there were 808 applicants for 461 positions with an overall match rate of 61% for all CAS participants (1). For those who submitted a rank list (and therefore attended at least one interview), the overall match rate was 75%. The good news is U.S. medical seniors have a match rate which is much higher than these figures (91%). Because of the fierce competition, especially for placement into top programs, it is important to begin preparing your application early. In fact, resume-building should begin on your first day of medical school. Create a document to keep track of every achievement and volunteer activity you have completed during college and medical school (with dates). This will make it much easier to create a CV when preparing your residency application.

A successful applicant will have a diverse and well-rounded application. However, some aspects are weighed more strongly than others by admission committees. Nallasamy surveyed residency programs to analyze current trends in the residency selection process. She determined the *most significant* factors by calculating the percentage of programs rating various aspects as “very important” or “among the most important.” The most significant factors were interview performance (95.4%), clinical course grades (93.9%), recommendation letters (83.1%), and board scores (80.0%) (2). The least significant factors were musical ability, having a parent as an ophthalmologist, being a leader, being a high achiever in sports, and having a PhD.

First and Second Year

Preclinical Course Grades

It is important to study diligently for your basic science courses during your first and second years of medical school and to earn as many Honors and Near Honors grades as possible. While these grades are not weighted as strongly as your grades in clinical rotations according to Nallasamy's study, they will still appear on your transcript. Furthermore, they are tremendously important in being elected into the [Alpha Omega Alpha](#) (AOA) Medical Honor Society and mastering knowledge of the basic sciences will prove useful when it comes time to take the USMLE Step 1 Board Exam the summer between your second and third years of medical school.

Extracurricular Activities

Aside from grades, you should choose several extracurricular activities to pursue. These may include student organizations, student government, tutoring, service projects, or other activities. There are many volunteer opportunities available in the Iowa City area and research positions are easy to acquire as a medical student. If you are a student at Iowa, you should pursue one of the [Research](#), [Service](#), [Humanities](#), [Teaching](#), or [Global Health](#) Distinction Tracks to gain official recognition for your activities. Finally, apply for as many scholarships as possible as there is a rather large section on the application specifically for awards. It is best to get involved with these activities early as time does not become any more abundant during your third year.

USMLE Step 1 Board Exam

Before you may start your third year in the wards, you must take and pass the USMLE Step 1 Board Exam. Your score on this exam is extraordinarily important when pursuing a competitive specialty (3). Many programs use this score as a screen to determine which applications to review, so if you score poorly the admission committee may never see the rest of your stellar application. In her study, Nallasamy found that 78% of programs used Step 1 scores as a factor in their selection process and 51% used the scores to decide who to call for interviews (2). This practice was especially prominent in more competitive programs and academic programs. For this reason, be prepared to dedicate a significant amount of time and resources on this exam. The average Step 1 score continues to climb for both matched and unmatched applicants (Figure 1) (1). In 2015, those who matched averaged a score of 243 while those who did not match averaged 228.

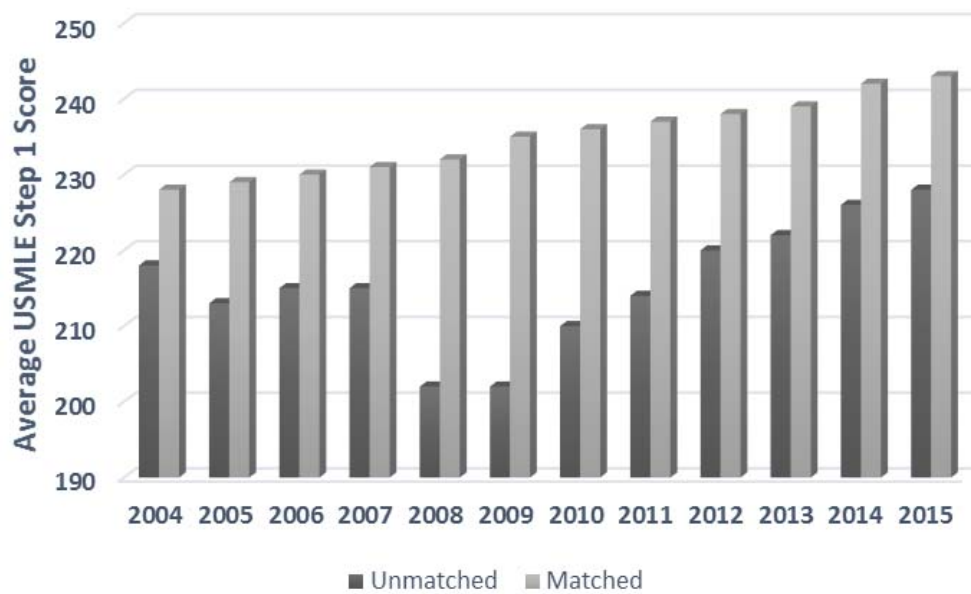


Figure 1. Average USMLE Step 1 Board Exam score for matched and unmatched applicants (1).

Third Year

Clinical Grades

Clerkship grades are more important than those on basic science courses as they are more indicative of your real-world performance in the hospital. Of all of your clerkships, it is most important to achieve high marks in your ophthalmology rotations. Although it is not essential, it may be useful to schedule your first ophthalmology rotation late in the first semester of your third year. This allows you to become accustomed to the hospital during other less-crucial rotations, yet it is still early enough in the year to confirm your interest in the field and pursue other ophthalmology-related activities. It is also a good idea to let your residents and faculty know that you are interested in ophthalmology as they will pay extra attention to you during your time in the clinic and it may even net you a better grade.

Letters of Recommendation

During your third year, be thinking about who you may want to ask for letters of recommendation. It is helpful to have letters from well-known faculty in the ophthalmology department, but only if they know you well. Try to obtain your letters from individuals you have worked with for at least a month, so the letter is meaningful and personalized, and supply them with your curriculum vitae (CV) and transcript so they have even more information on which to base the letter. You will need 3 letters for your ophthalmology application with the option of adding another one to your application for intern year. There are no strict guidelines regarding who to ask, but I recommend obtaining 2 from ophthalmology faculty and 1 from faculty in another department to diversify your application. You will need copies of your letters before you are able to send your application materials to the SF match in early August. Do your writers a favor and ask them for the letters *at least* a month or two before you need them so they are not forced to write them on short notice. If you are planning on asking someone with whom you worked early in your third year, it may be wise to let them know after you finish working with them so they may make some memorable notes to keep you fresh in his or her mind come letter-writing time.

Though I did not personally experience this, I have heard that some prelim medicine programs for intern year require letters from the chair of internal medicine at your school or at least an internal medicine doctor. You may want to keep this in mind when identifying people who may be well-suited to write your letters.

If you attend Iowa you will receive a cover sheet complete with directions for your letter writers. Check the box indicating that you waive the right to view your letters. This assures programs that your writers are giving a complete, accurate, and uncensored description of you. Despite checking this box, some writers may still send you a draft to make sure it is accurate.

Curriculum Vitae

Begin preparing your curriculum vitae in late spring or early summer, prior to requesting your letters of recommendation. In contrast to a resume, a CV is more focused on your professional and academic activities. In other words, you do not need to mention the summer you spent as a pizza delivery boy. Only include things that are relevant to your residency application unless they are very distinctive activities or achievements that will set you apart from the crowd. You will not actually send this CV with your application, but it is useful to organize your achievements and you can usually copy the information directly over to your residency application later in the summer. Additionally, it is useful if you provide your letter writers with a CV so they may learn more about you before writing your letter of recommendation. The University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine has an excellent [website](#) containing several example CV's.

Faculty Meeting

It is wise to set up a meeting with a faculty member in the department during your third year to express your interest in ophthalmology. This helps introduce you to the department and he or she can assess your competitiveness for the specialty. It is helpful if you can provide him or her with a CV and transcript to help with this process. If you do this earlier in your third year, you should have time to buff out any potential weaknesses in your application before you have to start preparing it for residency programs.

Closer to interview season, you may want to set up a brief meeting with the department head and residency director to introduce yourself. At Iowa, these people are Dr. Keith Carter and Dr. Tom Oetting. Make sure you come prepared with specific discussion points, questions, or material to review, otherwise you may find yourself in an awkward silence – not a great first impression.

Eye Rounds

The University of Iowa Department of Ophthalmology maintains an excellent website called [Eye Rounds](#). The site contains a collection of interesting photos, videos, and cases provided by residents, fellows, faculty, and students from the University of Iowa. The site generates huge amounts of web traffic and the articles quickly shoot to the top of the Google search results. This is a peer-reviewed website and you can later list all of your articles as publications on your application. You may write as many articles as you wish and this is a great opportunity to meet faculty members in the department. I would recommend writing at least one article during medical school. Eye Rounds is an exclusive opportunity for students at Iowa as you must attend the university to submit materials for the site. Contact Dr. Tom Oetting if you are interested.

Fourth Year

Electives

Most students choose to schedule an ophthalmology elective early in their fourth year as this allows them to obtain a letter of recommendation from a faculty member before they have to submit their application. To meet time constraints, this rotation *must* be scheduled within the first 2 scheduling blocks of the year according to Iowa's rotation

schedule. While the second scheduling block can work in a pinch, it is not ideal as you will have to ask for and receive your letter before even finishing the elective if you are planning on submitting your application early in the timeline. At Iowa, there are established clinical rotations in the cornea and neuro-ophthalmology clinics. You may also arrange personalized rotations in nearly any department if you contact the medical education coordinator, Dr. Richard Olson.

Away Rotations

You may elect to arrange for an away rotation at another institution. Many students choose to do this, although it is by no means mandatory. Away electives may help you get a foot in the door, and can increase your likelihood of matching at the institution where you are rotating. Bear in mind, the opposite can also be true. If you do not make a good impression during the clerkship, you may actually hurt your chances. Doing an away rotation does *not* guarantee you an interview spot at that institution and does not affect your odds of matching at other institutions. It is also worth mentioning that most other schools do not run on the same schedule as Iowa, so if you are an Iowa student rotating elsewhere, you will likely have to use a week of vacation time both before and after the rotation. If you are not planning on using the elective for a letter of recommendation, you can save 1 week of vacation by scheduling your away as your final elective before your time off for interview season.

USMLE Step 2 Board Exams

Students must take two more Board Exams during their fourth year. These include Step 2 Clinical Skills (CS) and Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK). The CS exam only requires a few days of review as it is based around simulated patients. It is graded on a strictly pass-fail basis and may be scheduled any time before the New Year. Scheduling the CK exam is a bit trickier and depends on how you did on Step 1. If you did well on Step 1, I would advise not taking Step 2 CK until December to avoid jeopardizing your application. Another good score will likely not help your application much, while a poor score could lead to disaster! If taken in December, you will not receive your score until after the match. On the other hand, if you were unhappy with your Step 1 score, an outstanding Step 2 CK score can give your application a needed boost. In this scenario, it is in your favor to schedule the exam early. There is a “sweet spot” in late fall where your score comes back too late to be sent out with your application, yet you have it before interviewing. You then have the choice of revealing your score to programs if you did well, or concealing it if you did not do as well as you had hoped. Most people study at least 1-2 weeks for the CK exam.

Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA)

AOA Honor Society status is awarded in two waves – one in March of your third year and one in late August of your fourth. Unless you were selected during your third year, you will not know if you obtained AOA status prior to submitting your application if you are sticking to the recommended timeline. On the CAS form, there is an AOA status radio button to select “yes” or “no” – do not click either if you were not elected in your third year as it is still uncertain whether you will be elected during your fourth. On your main online profile (not within the CAS application), there is a section for your board scores and AOA status. Here they include an “unknown” button which you may select. You may not revise your CAS application after submitting it, but you *can* change this main profile page to reflect AOA status updates. The timing of the AOA selection during your fourth year works in your favor if you do not think you will make AOA as this will not be shown on your application (“unknown” looks much better than “no”). AOA status is not essential and most matched applicants are not AOA members, but it does significantly increase the odds of matching (Figure 2) (3). Error! Bookmark not defined.

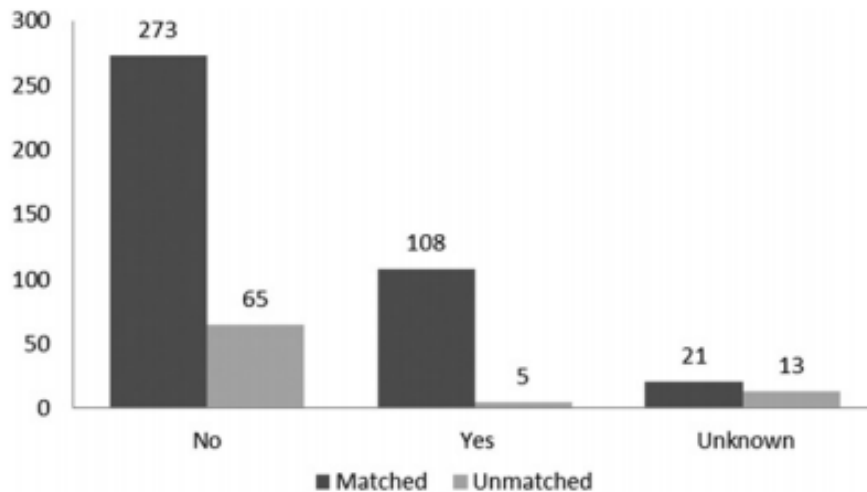


Figure 2. Match results by Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA) Honor Society membership (3).

Time Off

While interviewing, I was amazed that many other schools allowed their students to skip weeks of their rotations at a time for interviews without using vacation. If you attend Iowa, you will want to schedule time off during interview season. The Carver College of Medicine has a policy in which you are only guaranteed 1 day off per week during November and December. Optimistically, you may have 10-12 ophthalmology interviews and another 5-10 interviews for your intern year. Factor in social dinners and

realistic travel time, and it would be near impossible to meet the requirements of any clerkship during interview season.

If you absolutely do not wish to schedule vacation for interviews, you may be able to arrange for a more flexible rotation during this time, such as a research elective. Research electives are difficult to secure during this timeframe as many students, including those applying to other specialties, will be requesting them. Many other students are going to want vacation time during this period as well, so it is important that you rank it highly on your preference list. Use your #1 preference rank for your early ophthalmology elective and your #2 rank for your vacation or research elective. Don't fret if a clerkship ends up being scheduled during your vacation despite your best efforts. If this happens, contact Marcia Hopp and notify her of the problem. It is very likely she will be able to help you rearrange your schedule before interview season rolls around.

The Application Process

Residency Overview

Ophthalmology residencies are 3 years in length and require 1 year of general medical internship before you may begin. A few programs, including Iowa, have an integrated intern year which offers many advantages including additional ophthalmology training compared to more traditional internships. At residency programs without an integrated intern year, you may elect to do a preliminary year in internal medicine or general surgery, or you may choose a transitional year in which you rotate through a variety of different departments a few months at a time, similar to medical school. Transitional years have a reputation of being less demanding of your time and they can be extremely competitive for this reason. Not only do you compete with ophthalmology applicants for these positions, but also with applicants from other competitive fields such as dermatology, radiology, anesthesiology, and PM&R.

Many ophthalmologists decide to sub-specialize after residency by means of a fellowship. Fellowships in ophthalmology range in length from 1-2 years. Options include areas such as oculoplastics, retina, cornea and external disease, pediatrics, neuro-ophthalmology, glaucoma, and ocular pathology.

Acronyms

SF Match, CAS, ERAS, NRMP... The application process is wrought with acronyms. The San Francisco Match (SF Match) is the program responsible for organizing and

processing your ophthalmology application materials. The Central Application Service (CAS) then distributes the actual application form to programs and eventually the SF Match performs the algorithm which ultimately matches you with a residency program.

You apply for your intern year through the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS), which is the same service your colleagues are using for their residency applications to other fields. The National Residency Matching Program (NRMP) is the organization responsible for matching you with a program for your intern year.

Electronic Application

The majority of your application is submitted electronically on the SF Match website. You can start the electronic application on June 1st, and you may as well start it early as you can save your progress. There are two main portions to the site, your SF Match profile and the CAS application.

The SF Match profile is the page you initially see upon logging into the site. Among other things, it includes your name, address, USMLE Step 1 score, AOA status, and photo. Because your application timeline is ahead of your peers applying to other fields, you may not yet have received a copy of your senior photo. This isn't a problem, as most programs do not view this photo prior to interviews. Including the photo is actually optional and is really only used as a visual reminder of who is who when programs are making their rank lists. If you are concerned, you can always take your own photo at home. Unlike your CAS application, your profile page may be updated after submission of your application as long as the SF Match hasn't yet distributed your information to programs.

The CAS application is the online equivalent of your CV. It was converted from a paper form to a digital version in 2010 and has since undergone many changes. The website contains text boxes for you to enter and format information any way you wish. Take advantage of different formatting – **bold**, *italics*, and underlining to emphasize different aspects of your application. If you prepared a CV, it will now come in handy as you can essentially copy and paste the information into these text fields. When you are finished, your application will be converted to a PDF document which is digitally distributed to residency programs for review. While working on your application, you should check the “preview” at the end of each section and the “final preview” at the end of your application to see this final PDF version programs will be seeing. The system is still under development and contains bugs. You may find that the formatting in the generated PDF looks drastically different from what you entered. You may find bold formatting, extra spaces, or even abrupt truncation of your information if it doesn't fit in the size constraints of the text box. This also applies to what you have copied and pasted from Word, so check carefully.

You will spend many exhausting hours preparing your application, but keep in mind the person reviewing your application will probably be skimming the entire thing in under a minute. You want to make this person's life easy. It is important to carefully organize your information, include dates, and be concise. I would avoid full paragraphs for the majority of your application, and instead use bulleted lists. You can copy and paste bullets from Microsoft Word, use hyphens as bullets, or utilize a combination of both for multileveled lists. The only section that warrants a full paragraph, in my opinion, is the "career objectives" section. Here you should describe whether you are most interested in academia or private practice, how you will balance research and clinical practice, and whether you are interested in any particular fellowships. As mentioned elsewhere in this guide, it is best to lean toward academics and maintain ties to research for application and interview purposes, as this will increase your likelihood of receiving interviews at the more academic (and generally more esteemed) institutions.

Personal Statement

Similar to applying for medical school, you will need to write a personal statement. This should be a single page capturing your unique background with the path that led you to ophthalmology. Use the opportunity to grab the attention of the person reading your application, but do not go too far with your creativity. I recommend writing your personal statement like a novel, giving a brief overview of your life and the events that led to your interest in ophthalmology. Be descriptive and try to paint a picture in the reader's mind. Provide just enough information about interesting events and experiences to pique the reader's interest, but intentionally leave out detail so they are salivating for more. This will create a desire to interview you so they may ask further questions, and create easy discussion points during your interview day. Give them examples that demonstrate important qualities in the profession such as intelligence, fine motor skills, and the ability to communicate with others. Let them connect the dots without explicitly mentioning how these activities relate to the field, then bring everything together in a grand conclusion paragraph. Revise, revise, revise. When you think you are done, put your statement down for a week, then revise it again. The personal statement is a very important piece of your application package and you want it to leave a lasting impression. The Carver College of Medicine has advice and examples at their [website](#).

I have heard admissions committee members joke about some of the ridiculous personal statements they have read. Sounding crazy in your personal statement ("the eye is the window to the soul...") may quickly land your application in the waste basket. Do not talk about how your rare eye disease got you interested in ophthalmology because admitting such a disability can greatly handicap you in a very visual specialty and may cause programs to hesitate when considering your application. Be very careful about how you word each sentence and the conclusion to which a critical reader may jump. Those reviewing your personal statement will be carefully searching for any clue

that may give them a reason not to invite you to interview. Finally, and most importantly, do *not* misspell the word *o-p-h-t-h-a-l-m-o-l-o-g-y!*

You must also submit a personal statement with your ERAS application for intern year. How you approach this is entirely up to you. Some applicants resubmit their exact ophthalmology statement while others write a completely new one. Most applicants, however, strike a happy medium by reusing the bulk of their ophthalmology statement while tweaking a few sentences in the conclusion paragraph to state how an intern year will make them a more rounded physician. Prelim and transitional year admissions committees realize you are ultimately going into ophthalmology and are more interested in what led you to choosing that specialty rather than why you are dying to be an intern for a year.

Program List

The final component of the online application is a list of all programs to which you would like your application to be submitted. Choosing programs can be tricky and is discussed later in this guide. You are billed for each program you include, and this price rises incrementally as you apply to more programs (see table below). If you are submitting a well-pruned list, it is in your best interest to determine your definitive list prior to submitting your application, as later add-ons come at an inflated price of \$35 per program regardless of how many programs were selected in the initial distribution. If you are initially applying to over 40 programs, you will be paying \$35 each at that point anyway, so there is no increase in price for later add-ons.

<i># of CAS Distributions</i>	<i>Fees</i>
1 – 10	\$60 total
11 – 20	\$10 per program
21 – 30	\$15 per program
31 – 40	\$20 per program
41 or more	\$35 per program

Supporting (Mail Submission) Materials

Being the 21st century, you would think the SF Match would have a fully electronic submission. However, they still require you to physically mail your supporting materials (transcripts, letters of recommendation, USMLE scores, etc.) so they can scan and distribute them to programs. Each of these components is covered below.

Letters of recommendation

Hopefully by this point, you have found suitable writers for your letters of recommendation and already asked them if they would be willing to write for you. At Iowa, the letters will be sent to the OSAC office where they will be scanned and sealed in envelopes with signatures over the envelope flap. You will eventually pick up the sealed envelopes to mail them to the SF Match with the rest of your application package.

Transcripts

The SF Match requires applicants to obtain and submit transcripts for all undergraduate, graduate, and medical schools they have attended. ERAS, however, does not require an undergrad transcript, so you will only need to request one copy from your undergrad institution. When you receive your transcripts, leave them sealed in the envelopes in which you received them. If you took any classes at another college, include these as well if they are related to your science or pre-medical degree. If not, they are not required (for example, I did not request a transcript for my outside SCUBA certification course for which I received college credit).

At Iowa, your medical school transcript can typically be ordered through ISIS after August 1, but sometimes a bit earlier. Ask Annette Griffin if you are unsure. If you also did your undergrad at Iowa, your undergrad coursework will appear on the medical school transcript so you do not have to order a separate copy.

Transcript requests can sometimes take a few weeks to process and receive through the mail, so do not put this off until the last second.

USMLE Board Scores

You must also include a copy of all USMLE scores you have received thus far. They tell you to order an official score report which costs a whopping \$70. Not so fast! Put your wallet back in your pocket and print out the free student print-out, including the score breakdown, by logging in to the USMLE website. This is the same PDF report you checked to discover your score(s) for the first time. I previously verified this with SF Match and this score report is sufficient for your application.

Additionally, USMLE Board scores are released to the SF Match program electronically when you give them permission on their website. They give you the option of automatically updating your application whenever a new score becomes available, but it is in your best interest to decline. If you do receive your Step 2 score during the application process, you then have the option of releasing it to programs if you scored well, while retaining it if you didn't.

AOA Induction Letter

Finally, include your AOA induction letter if you have received one.

Additional Materials

Some schools will require you to send additional materials with your application for it to be considered. These include things such as CV's, an additional statement specifically stating why you are interested in their program, or a clinic note from a recent eye exam. This information is usually on the SF Match website, but occasionally it is not. I would spend a few minutes perusing the website for each program to which you are applying to make sure you are not closing any doors just because you forgot to send a supporting document.

Submission

Many of these components will be sealed in their own envelope to prevent tampering. You may wish to label the bottom corner of each envelope with its contents to keep everything straight. Put all of these in a single, larger envelope along with a sheet of paper stating your name and application number to make things easier on the person opening your envelope in San Francisco. FedEx and UPS offer real-time package tracking, but are expensive (at the time of my application, FedEx was charging \$27 for 2-day delivery). USPS Priority Mail is a more budget-friendly option (it was about \$6 for 2-3 day delivery). Each year a "target date" in late August or early September is provided on a [timetable](#) posted on the SF match website. This is the date by which you want them to have distributed your complete application package to programs to avoid missing deadlines at most programs (not the date by which you should have mailed your supporting materials). Keep in mind, it takes up to 3 weeks for your application package to reach them by snail mail and for them to scan and process your documents before they are ready for distribution. Programs individually set deadlines, and some are as early as September 1, so make sure to find the dates for the programs to which you are applying. Additionally, applications are eventually sent out in waves and it is in your advantage to be in the first wave, so the earlier the better. Shoot for early to mid August, at least 3 weeks prior to the posted target date.

Dean's Letter

The Dean's Letter is a generic summary of your academic achievements and extracurricular involvement. It includes the comments you have received on your evaluation forms during your second and third year as well as your performance in each class as compared to your peers. The letter is compiled and automatically sent to SF Match and ERAS after it is released on October 1. In my experience, this letter was probably the most overlooked piece of information by ophthalmology admissions committees and was admittedly of very low importance.

Choosing Ophthalmology Programs

Selecting the programs to which you should send your application can be a daunting task. There are currently between 110 and 120 ophthalmology residency programs in the country (search [FREIDA](#) for a complete list). If you can specify your search to a specific geographic region, that will narrow the options considerably. However, this may not be possible as the best programs are sprinkled across the country. There are a variety of websites providing information on programs, but you must take this with a grain of salt because there is no way to be certain who is writing the reviews. Some of these sites include the Residency Compendium thread at [Student Doctor Network](#) (which is moderated by Dr. Doan who completed his residency at Iowa), [Scutwork](#), and [MatchApplicants](#) among others. You can also use Google to find departmental websites and these are usually fairly helpful. The Ophthalmology Times previously ranked departments annually and they also specifically provided rankings for residency programs. They no longer perform these rankings, but the most recent results from 2010 are displayed below (Table 1) (4). These may not be entirely accurate anymore as some of these programs have undergone significant changes such as that acquisition of the Doheny Eye Institute by UCLA.

U.S. News & World Report continues to rate ophthalmology clinics annually, but does not specifically rank residency programs (Table 2). Nobody knows exactly how reliable these rankings are, and while the exact order is often debated, any program appearing in the “top 10” is generally highly regarded. They are now integrating physician votes from the physician social media website Doximity.com into their rankings. Hopefully they will find a way to maintain some degree of objectivity in the rankings rather than turning them into a popularity contest.

Best Overall Programs	Best Research Programs	Best Residency Programs	Best Clinical (Patient Care) Programs
1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute/University of Miami	1. Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University	1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute/University of Miami	1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute/University of Miami
2. Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University	2. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute/University of Miami	2. Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University	2. Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University
3. Wills Eye Institute/Thomas Jefferson University	3. Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard University	3. Wills Eye Institute/Thomas Jefferson University	3. Wills Eye Institute/Thomas Jefferson University
4. Jules Stein Eye Institute/UCLA	4. Jules Stein Eye Institute/UCLA	4. University of Iowa	4. Jules Stein Eye Institute/UCLA
5. Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard University	5. Duke University Eye Center	5. Jules Stein Eye Institute/UCLA	5. University of Iowa
6. Duke University Eye Center	6. University of Iowa	6. Duke University Eye Center	6. Duke University Eye Center
7. University of Iowa	7. Wills Eye Institute/Thomas Jefferson University	7. Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard University	7. Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard University
8. Doheny Eye Institute/University of South California	8. Doheny Eye Institute/University of South California	8. Doheny Eye Institute/University of South California	8. W.K. Kellogg Eye Center/University of Michigan
9. Washington University in St. Louis	9. Washington University in St. Louis	9. Emory Eye Center/Emory University	9. Doheny Eye Institute/University of South California
10. W.K. Kellogg Eye Center/University of Michigan	10. Scheie Eye Institute/University of Pennsylvania	10. W.K. Kellogg Eye Center/University of Michigan	10. Emory Eye Center/Emory University

Table 1. Ophthalmology Times ophthalmology program rankings, 2010 (4).

2015 U.S. News & World Report Ophthalmology Rankings
1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute/University of Miami
2. Wills Eye Institute/Thomas Jefferson University
3. Wilmer Eye Institute/Johns Hopkins University
4. Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary/Harvard University
5. Stein and Doheny Eye Institutes/UCLA
6. Cleveland Clinic
7. University of Iowa
8. Duke University Eye Center
9. USC Eye Institute
10. W.K. Kellogg Eye Center/University of Michigan
11. New York Eye and Ear Infirmary
12. Emory Eye Center/Emory University
13. Barnes-Jewish Hospital/Washington University

Table 2. U.S. News & World Report ophthalmology program rankings, 2015 (5).

You can mine out a fair amount of information on your own, but the best resources, by far, are faculty members, residents, and fellows in the department. Ophthalmology is a relatively small field and there is a good chance these people have colleagues and friends at other institutions. This provides wonderful insight that rankings will not specify, such as whether the atmosphere is “malignant,” if residents seem happy, and how prepared residents are after graduation. They may also know of upcoming changes to a program that may not otherwise be advertised during the interview process. Ask your mentor(s) if you can meet to discuss your application and suitable programs for the strength of your application. At Iowa, Dr. Tom Oetting and Dr. Richard Olson are always happy to meet with students for this purpose.

There is good reason to meet with a knowledgeable person who is able to match your application strength with the programs to which you should apply. The residency match works differently than applying to college where you could apply to safety schools and know you would be accepted. Residency programs take pride in matching applicants at the top of their rank lists. If you are a super-applicant, a lower-tier residency program may not rank you highly or even interview you because they know you are not going to end up at their program. They often prefer to use their top ranking positions on applicants whom they think will end up at their program so they match higher on their list. It sounds silly, but it’s the way the match system works. To summarize, applying to lower-tier schools with a competitive application may not net you many interviews in the same way that applying to competitive schools with a weak application won’t. You want to diversify between program strength to a certain extent, but your program list needs to be matched to your application strength.

Another consideration is whether you intend to go into private practice or academics. Some programs are more well-known for research and producing academic physicians while others are more tailored toward training comprehensive ophthalmologists going into private practice. There is a section of your application asking what your aspirations are as a future physician. Putting academics in this section should not limit your interview offers, but putting private practice may turn off some of the more academic programs. For this reason, I would recommend leaning toward academics for interview purposes.

There is no set number of programs that is right for everyone and the majority of applicants end up applying to many more than they should. In 2015, the average applicant applied to 61 programs, a number that continues to rise each year (Figure 3) (1). SF Match charges an incremental application fee depending on how many programs you wish to apply and this is a good reason to limit your number. Depending on your competitiveness, the sweet spot as a compromise between cost and safety is in the 30’s. Beyond 40, the fee increases to \$35 per additional program. If your application is less competitive, however, it is a worthwhile investment to apply to many programs to increase your odds of receiving a sufficient number of interview offers.

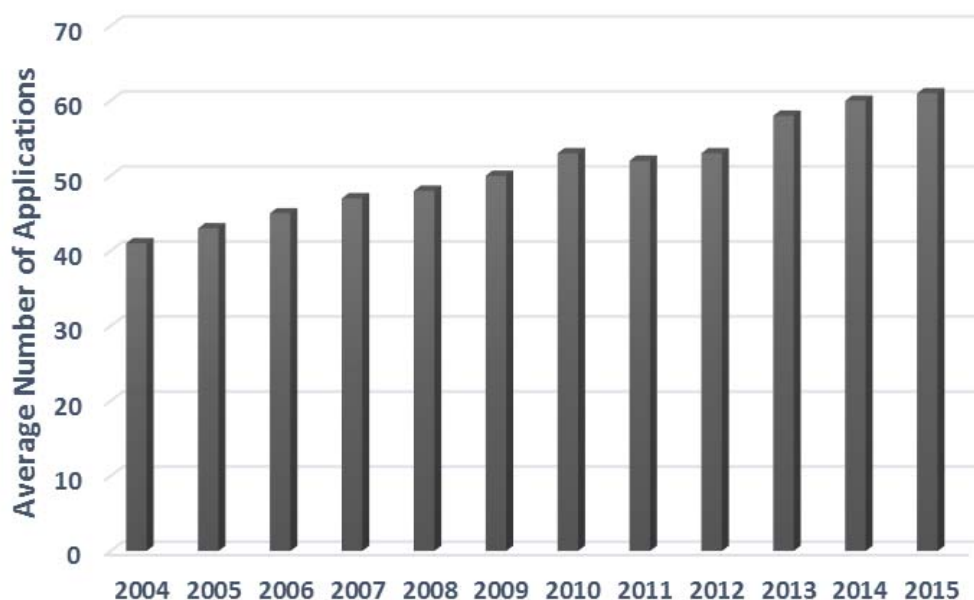


Figure 3. Average number of ophthalmology residency applications submitted per applicant (1).

Choosing Programs for Intern Year

A few ophthalmology programs in the country, including the University of Iowa, now have integrated intern years. This is a tremendous advantage in a variety of ways. If you schedule your internship interviews after Ophthalmology Match Day, you can save a huge amount of time and money by canceling all of these interviews if you happen to match at one of these programs. You can also potentially eliminate one move (which can cost thousands of dollars) since you'll be at the same location for both components of your residency training. In terms of education, you will have an entire year to familiarize yourself with the location, hospital systems, and electronic medical record, prior to starting residency. Meeting individuals in other departments is useful as you will be interacting with these people during consultations as an ophthalmology resident during your next 3 years. Finally, and most importantly, you will receive additional ophthalmology training during your intern year which you would not otherwise receive in the more traditional internships. At the University of Iowa, interns receive 5 months of ophthalmology training during their internship prior to beginning residency and taking their first day of ophthalmology call. This is invaluable.

If you match at one of the majority of programs that still does not have an integrated internship, you have the choice of completing a transitional year, a prelim year in internal medicine, or a prelim year in general surgery. In general, transitional years are more desirable as they offer a more diverse experience and require less work hours. That being said, transitional years can be extremely competitive and are not available at all institutions.

People have varying opinions on where to do their intern year. Some view it as an opportunity to travel to an exotic destination for a year before returning for their ophthalmology residency. Others want to minimize the number of times they are required to move and they look in either the city of their medical school or the city of their future residency program. Unlike other applicants for transitional and prelim years, as an ophthalmology applicant you will have the advantage of knowing where you matched for residency before having to submit your rank list due to the early match.

It can be much more difficult to find information on transitional and prelim programs than their ophthalmology counterparts. The best source for information on these programs is by word of mouth. Talk with M4's who have finished interviewing or current residents in fields requiring a separate intern year. Past program reviews can be found on various message boards across the internet, but with the change in intern duty-hours requirements in 2011, all programs have had to redesign the way their residents take night float and call. Until newer reviews are posted, it will be difficult to know which programs are now "cush" and which have forsaken their coveted "cush" reputation.

The optimum number of applications for intern year varies widely depending on who you ask. I've talked to residents who only applied to 1 and others who applied to 30. I think anywhere from 10-15 is generally appropriate.

Interviews

You have submitted your application and are now waiting for interviews – what a relief! There is still plenty of work to do as interview season is just around the corner. Most interviews take place between late October and mid December. Hopefully you have scheduled vacation during this time as most clerkships are not very forgiving for missing more than 1 day per week.

Master Calendar

Interview offers are generally sent out by email, although a few are made by phone. Programs have limited dates available and they fill up *ridiculously* fast. This means you need to be on your toes, ready to respond to any interview emails within minutes to get your first choice of dates. For this to work efficiently, I recommend making a calendar to determine your optimal interview schedule. I used Google Calendar and printed a paper copy to carry in my pocket, but anything will do as long as it is easily accessible and always with you. Using a combination of SF Match (click on the program names)

and departmental websites, find this year's interview dates for all of the programs to which you are applying. If you cannot find the dates for a program in which you are very interested, you can politely send the program coordinator an email asking if the dates have been decided. Put all of the dates on your calendar then find a combination that allows you to visit all of your top choices. It may be helpful to group them by geographic location, but this is not always possible. Also keep in mind that many programs have an interview dinner the night before or after your interview, so try not to pack your interviews too tightly. Programs typically notify you of dinner times alongside their interview offer or in your scheduling confirmation email – do not forget to add these additional commitments to your master calendar as you will need to adjust your travel and schedule accordingly. With this calendar, you will be able to instantly respond to invitation emails with your date selection without giving it a second thought.

There is some debate over scheduling early versus later in the season. The thought is that those who make a positive impression early will be held in high esteem and the later applicants may not live up to these high standards the interview committee has built up. Interviewing early has the possible downside that you will be forgotten later in the season and lost among the sea of later applicants. Later interviewees are more recent in the committee's mind when forming the final rank list. I personally liked scheduling the later interview dates for the programs I was most interested in, but in the end, the difference is probably not too significant. If you do have an earlier interview date with a program, you may elect to send them an email around the time of their final interviews to re-iterate your interest in the program and bring your name back into the spotlight.

Another consideration in making your schedule is interview performance. Most interviews end up being fairly similar so you become more skilled at interviewing as the season progresses. Late in the season, however, you may begin to fatigue and your performance may actually decline as a result. Therefore, peak performance usually takes place midway through the interview season.

Despite all your hard efforts, you are bound to end up with some interview dates you didn't anticipate. You can contact programs with whom you previously had scheduled interviews and ask if they have openings on other dates for you to swap. If not, they can often put you on a waiting list and contact you when one becomes available. Additionally, I've heard of others having success using the annual "interview swap thread" on Student Doctor Network where applicants work out personal trades with each other and simply contact the program to inform them of the change.

Smartphones

As I mentioned, the desirable dates fill up obscenely quickly. To get your optimal schedule, you literally need to respond within minutes for most programs. Obviously,

you are not going to be sitting in front of a computer all day, so your smartphone will become your best friend. If you don't have one, now may be the time to consider the upgrade. Enable email alerts so you are instantly notified when you have received a new email. If you receive many unrelated emails throughout the day, your phone will become the boy who cried wolf. One option to remedy this situation is to create a unique email address exclusively for the SF Match website and other interview-related activity. Remove all other email accounts from your phone so you know that every email alert concerns an interview. This will give you an advantage in the battle against time. If you do receive an interview offer during the day, politely excuse yourself from whatever you are doing and send a quick response on your phone. Do not put off your reply, or the most coveted dates *will* fill. To respond speedily to emails, I had a saved draft of a reply that I could fill out quickly with my date preferences. It thanked the coordinator for the invitation, followed by "My first choice of interview date is _____, followed by _____ as my second choice, and _____ as my third." If multiple dates potentially worked in my schedule, I listed them in order of preference. If I could only attend a single date, I would request it and elect for the waiting list if I was too sluggish in my response to snatch it up.

For those Iowa students who refuse to purchase a smartphone, it is possible to forward university emails containing certain keywords (i.e., "interview," "ophthalmology," and "residency") to your pager's email routing address using Outlook rules (options > create an inbox rule > new). If you elect to do this, do not use "eye" as a keyword or you will get excited about every "Hawkeye" email that you receive. To forward emails to your pager, route them to ####.uihc@paging.healthcare.uiowa.edu (where #### is your pager number). Beware, forwarding email to your pager will forward the *entire* email separated into chunks abiding to the allowed character limit – be prepared to receive a rapid fire succession of pages for each email. Even if you do have a smartphone, this is still helpful as your pager gives you an excuse to step out of lecture or clinic to send a quick reply.

Interview Number

In 2015, the average applicant received 4.3 interviews (1). Early on, you should accept *every* interview offer you receive to build your numbers. If you are fortunate, you may eventually have more interviews than you need and you will have to decide how many to keep. The more interviews you attend, the more programs you can order on your rank list. One would think more interviews would therefore increase your chances of matching and this is true to some extent. This was investigated by Yousuf, and in 2011, he found a clear benefit up to 6 programs (3). After this, however, returns began to diminish. After the 11th program, there was no longer any additional significant benefit. Therefore, I would shoot for 10-12 interviews if you can get them. If you decide to cancel an interview, let the program know as soon as possible so they may offer the position to a more interested applicant. There is absolutely no reason to keep them on

your calendar if you have no intention of attending. As a rule of thumb, you should give programs at least 2 weeks notice if you decide to cancel an interview with them. If you make a bad impression with a program, you never know if word will travel to another institution and they may never forgive you if you decide to apply for a fellowship down the road.

The number of interviews recommended for intern year varies more widely. Generally, if you are set on a transitional year, you should go on more interviews as these programs tend to be more competitive. In my experience, the majority of candidates seem to go on 5-10 interviews for their intern year. As mentioned earlier, if you are hoping to attend a program with an integrated intern year, consider scheduling your internship interviews after Ophthalmology Match Day so you can cancel them if you match at that program. Similarly, if there are certain internship locations that you would only consider if you matched at a nearby program for ophthalmology, you should also schedule these interviews after Ophthalmology Match Day so you can cancel them if you do not end up at that program.

Do not become too nervous if your friends pursuing other specialties receive interview offers before you. Despite having an early match, ophthalmology interview offers go out relatively late compared to many other medical fields. While the ophthalmology forum on the Student Doctor Network website can be anxiety inducing, it is particularly useful to see when individual programs have begun sending interview offers. Each year, an interview thread is started and members post when they have received offers from various programs. If a program has sent out their first wave of interviews and you did not receive one, your chances of receiving one are reduced, but not zero. Some programs send invites in multiple waves and those that send a single wave may later have openings as applicants cancel their interviews with the program. The timing of interview invitations is widely spread, which can make planning difficult. You may hear from your first program as early as August, before any deadlines have passed. The majority of first round invitations occur in October and they continue through early November. Offers continue through interview season as applicants revise their schedules and you may continue to receive offers through early December.

If a program you are particularly interested in has sent out offers and you did not receive one, it is worthwhile to call or email the program coordinator to assess the status of your application. Say something like, "I am a fourth-year medical student at the University of Iowa and have applied for a residency position at your program. I have received interview offers at many of the very best programs in the country, but have not yet heard back from your program. I am extremely interested in your program and was curious regarding the status of my application." Expressing interest in the program can drastically raise your position in the waiting list, making it much more likely that you will receive an interview offer should one become available. You may wonder if it is even worth attending one of these second-offer interviews. In my understanding, the majority (if not all) of those interviewing you will have no idea that you weren't a first-

round invite. With a pile of extremely similar applications, there is always an element of chance determining exactly who gets interviews at which institution. It is said that once you are at the interview, everyone is essentially back on an equal playing field. At this point, the interviewers are then attempting to stratify applicants based on things such as personability and communication abilities. In sum, take the second-offer interview and stroll into the interview with energy and confidence – you may just knock their socks off.

Dinners and Socials

Have fun with the interview process. You will make friends with other applicants and bump into them over and over along the trail. Many programs host dinner or social with the residents the night before or after your interviews. Take this opportunity to meet residents and ask any burning questions you may have about the program or city. It is important that the residents meet you as they often have input on the selection process. Attending these dinners is not required, but make as many as you can (especially for those programs in which you are most interested) as it shows that you have commitment to the program. I was repeatedly asked by interviewers if I would be attending the dinner, and I felt as if it was a covert assessment of my commitment to the program.

The dinners are held at a range of locales, including resident houses, bars, and fancy restaurants. You may not know the scenario prior to arriving, so planning attire can be difficult. As a general rule, I would avoid jeans even though the residents will frequently sport them. It is much safer for guys to wear khakis and a polo, button-down shirt, or sweater. Most girls wear a casual and appropriate dress or nice pants and a conservative shirt. Nobody will likely notice what you are wearing, but it is comforting to know you won't be painfully underdressed.

At many dinners you will be offered a drink. Generally, it is absolutely fine to accept the offer as many of the current residents will probably be drinking as well. Make sure to bring a bit of cash since some programs will not pay for your drinks. If you do choose to imbibe, it is wise not to over-indulge or you may end up the comic relief of the party and not in a good way.

The Interviews

Nearly every applicant I met on the trail (including me) seemed to carry a black portfolio with him or her to each interview. Mine contained a pen, my printed SF match application, my published manuscripts, and blank paper for taking notes. I never once pulled anything from the portfolio and I got the feeling that others did not either. It is mostly there for comfort – the applicant's version of a security blanket. Guys typically

just carried their portfolios while girls often brought a conservative tote bag. In addition to the portfolio these totes were often loaded with “emergency kits” including items like lint rollers, Chapstick, mints, hair ties, extra hose, contact lens solution, Tylenol, and cough drops. Don’t forget to discretely carry your smartphone so you can send stealthy replies to other invitations during any downtime you may have.

The interviews themselves are pretty similar between programs and you will become an expert at the process by the end of the interview season. Interviews typically last between a half and a full day. You may have multiple 1 on 1 interviews, several 2 on 1 interviews, or a single panel interview in which you sit across from a handful of faculty members at one time.

You have gotten through medical school by studying hard for exams, but these interviews carry far more weight than any exam when it comes to matching. It pays to do your homework and spend time studying beforehand. Read each program’s website the night before the interview so you have some background knowledge in case they ask you why you chose to apply to their program. Make a list of commonly asked questions and think about how you would answer them. Read over your research manuscripts and personal statement so you are prepared for questions. Form opinions on hot political topics in medicine and even consider brushing up on some basic ophthalmology in case you are pipped with knowledge based questions (although this is extremely uncommon). During interviews, act excited about your answers and show energy even if you don’t think your response is very stimulating. How you present your responses is just as important as their content. In fact, your interviewers are likely more interested in your ability to communicate than the information you are giving them. Be punctual, positive, and cheerful even if you’ve had a terrible travel experience. You’d rather be the memorable lad who shows up in shorts, a t-shirt, and a smile because your luggage didn’t accompany you on your rescheduled flight (yes, I did see this on my interview trail), than the bum who staggers in grumbling about how his flight was delayed. Know your application inside and out. Interviewers will ask you about items in your application far more frequently than anything else, so be prepared to elaborate on that mission trip to Africa, your research project on the latest and greatest surgical gadget, or that tantalizing tidbit you carefully planted in your personal statement.

Some questions are almost guaranteed along the interview trail. It will serve you well to prepare clever responses to the following:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose ophthalmology?
- Tell me about *<some aspect in your application, CV, or personal statement>*.
- What do you do for fun?
- Why are you interested in our program?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

- Do you plan on a career in private practice or academics?
- Are you interested in pursuing a fellowship?
- If I asked your friends to describe you, what would they say?
- If you were to describe yourself in 3 words, what would they be?
- Tell us about an interesting case you have seen and how it influenced you.
- What are your biggest strengths and weaknesses?
- Why would a Midwest person like you want to move to the West Coast (or other region)?
- Iowa has an excellent program; why would you want to leave?
- What are you looking for in a residency program?
- What sets you apart from the other candidates for this position?

Other questions are less common, but you may still encounter them at some point along the interview trail:

- What is your biggest failure and how did you handle it?
- What is your most significant accomplishment to date?
- What did you find interesting in medical school, other than ophthalmology?
- Do you support a national healthcare plan? (or other questions about recent political or medical news developments)
- What leadership positions have you had?
- Where else are you interviewing?
- How do you deal with stress?
- Who is the person you most admire?
- Tell me a joke.
- What if you don't match?
- If you couldn't go into medicine, what would you do?
- If there is one thing you could change in your past, what would it be?
- How would your spouse feel about moving to this city? (or some other question to assess your spouse's profession and his/her mobility)
- What is the last leisure book you read?
- Explain this *<poor grade or USMLE Board exam score>* in your application.
- What was your favorite (or least favorite) job and why?

I was asked all of the above questions at least once during my interviews. Of course there are countless more potential questions, and I urge you to seek out lists online to become as prepared as possible. Study your responses prior to each interview so they are fresh in your mind. There are always rumors of programs that require you to perform some sort of manual dexterity test during an interview, but this practice is extremely uncommon and you are unlikely to have to deal with it. If you do encounter something like this, I think the interviewer would be more interested in how you handle the stress of the situation than your actual performance.

You will be asked if you have any questions more times than you care for. Have a list prepared so you can portray interest in the program. I always tried to ask at least one question when placed in this situation. If all else fails and you are out of questions, ask the interviewer the same question you asked someone else earlier in the day. Be cautious with the questions you ask, as some can change the interviewers' perception of you. There is a host of forbidden questions (i.e., "When can I start moonlighting?" or "How much maternity leave do we get?") which you should avoid at all cost. Don't worry, there will usually be some unknowing applicant who will ask these questions so you can overhear the answers. If not, you may be able to find the answers on the programs' websites or by word of mouth.

Thank You Notes and Follow-up Letters

Thank you notes are one area where there are no clear right or wrong answers. Generally, programs say they are nice to receive, but not necessary. According to Nallasamy's survey, only 14% of ophthalmology program directors expect or desire thank you letters (2). You can't hurt yourself by sending them though, so I recommend taking a few minutes after each interview to write a personalized message to the program director and perhaps also the program coordinator and department chair. Sending an individual note to each interviewer is probably excessive and some programs specifically request that you not send thank you notes. Type or hand write your thank you notes and either email or send them by snail mail. I typed mine, then printed, signed, and mailed them. Certain programs directly instruct applicants to email any thank you notes that are sent, so this may be the preferred method in some cases. It also saves you a few stamps!

Many applicants send a letter or email to their top programs after completing all of their interviews, often letting their favorite know that they are planning to rank them number 1. Again, I don't think this can hurt you as long as you are sincere in your claims, but it is not likely to help either as only 3% of program directors are swayed by such information (2).

Travel

The interview trail can be incredibly expensive, so you want to find the best travel deals possible. Travel expenses over the interview season will likely set you back \$2000-5000, although I personally know people who spent as much as \$10,000 because they attended many interviews requiring flights and hotel stays (6). I found it helpful to make a packing checklist of required items for my travels which I frequently referenced to minimize the chances of forgetting anything. The free web service and smartphone app,

[Triplt](#), is invaluable for organizing your mountain of plane tickets, rental cars, and hotel reservations.

Expect some delays and other travel issues, especially since most of the interview season occurs during winter. For the programs in which you are most interested, I would make sure to arrive with plenty of buffer in your schedule to allow for these mishaps. This also has the advantage of giving you time to explore the region. If you do have to miss an interview secondary to unavoidable travel problems, just let the program coordinator know. During the 2013 interview trail, one particular applicant's flight was canceled the evening prior to an interview he was very excited to attend. As a result, he did not arrive until midway through the interview day and he missed the overview and tour. Fortunately, this candidate handled it with grace and he actually ended up matching at the program.

Planes

Everyone has their favorite fare-finding website, and mine is Kayak.com. It seems to consistently have prices that are equal to or better than competing search engines. It also makes it easy to specify takeoff and landing times and to search by flexible dates and nearby airports. Using this feature, those traveling from Iowa City will find it is almost always cheaper to fly out of Moline, IL than Cedar Rapids or Des Moines. I also recommend signing up for a free account and setting up daily email alerts to keep track of specific fare prices. These alerts create graphs of fare prices over time and email the data to you each morning. This helps you determine what a good price for a given ticket is and purchase them when there is a sudden drop in price.

Some budget airlines are not included in search engines such as Kayak. Two of these are Allegiant Air and Southwest Airlines. Allegiant offers amazing prices to limited destinations, but they have very few scheduling options. It is worthwhile to check Allegiant if you will be interviewing near one of their destinations. Southwest has the benefit of flexible scheduling. They allow you to cancel and reschedule flights for no fee which is invaluable during interview season when you will be frequently juggling interview dates.

Though debated, it has been suggested that Wednesdays may offer the cheapest airline fares on average (7) and work by economist Makoto Watanabe predicts that the best time to purchase airline tickets is 8 weeks in advance (8). I caution you not to wait too long before purchasing your tickets as prices tend to rapidly rise within 2 weeks of the flight date.

If you have to catch a plane the evening after an interview, let the program coordinator know as soon as you have your flight schedule and he or she may be able to arrange for

your interviews to finish earlier in the day. Of course, this may not be possible at every institution depending on the way they schedule their interviews.

When flying, try to pack everything in a carry-on bag. You absolutely cannot risk delayed luggage if it contains your suit or other interview day essentials. If you can't fit everything in a single carry-on, you are also allowed to bring an additional personal item which can be a purse or backpack and this will hopefully give you enough space to pack your things.

Traveling with a suit can be difficult. Some flyers use folding garment bags even though they aren't technically within the size requirements for carry-on bags. This is getting riskier as airlines are cracking down on carry-on size requirements and you may be forced to check the luggage. I've heard of others asking to use the flight attendant's hanging closet with variable success. I ended up wearing my jacket and folding the pants carefully in the top of my carry-on which worked quite well.

This is a great time to sign up for free frequent flyer accounts if you do not already have them. You can typically find a link to do this from each airline's website. Since you will likely be doing a good deal of flying, you may as well start building rewards toward a free flight.

Cars

To cut costs and avoid travel delays, I drove to every interview within a reasonable distance rather than purchasing a plane ticket. If you are able to cluster your distant interviews together, you may also benefit from one-way car rentals. Rather than booking a short flight, you can often save a significant amount of money by renting a car and leaving it at your next destination. I saved hundreds by renting a car in the Northeast and slowly making my way down to the Southeast where I eventually left it and flew out. While this is almost always cheaper than flying, keep in mind that one-way car rentals are considerably more expensive than returning the car at the facility where you originally obtained it. Be sure to check the price before deciding on this option.

When you fly into a city, you also have the problem of getting from the airport to your hotel and eventually the interview site. You can grab a taxi, but with such [high fares](#), you can probably save money by renting a car. Sometimes you can find them for under \$15 per day and they have the added advantage of granting you the ability to see more of the city if you have time. Airport shuttles are another option if they are available to your hotel, but they obviously have a less flexible schedule.

When shopping for a rental car, I always start off at Kayak to get a general idea what prices are in the area. Then I compare with deal-finding sites like Priceline and Hotwire.

These sites work similarly in that you don't know which rental company you are purchasing from, but they usually have better deals than you can find elsewhere. Priceline requires you to provide your best offer while Hotwire gives you the price straight-up. Using this method, I was almost always able to find cheaper rates than booking directly from the rental agencies' websites, especially for one-way rentals.

Unless you're set on a Mustang convertible, go for the compact model to save cash. If the rental agency happens to be out of compacts (which isn't uncommon), they will offer you a free upgrade. They will always try to persuade you to purchase upgrades at the counter – stand your ground and don't give in. You are trying to get a deal here! Look into your credit card benefits and auto insurance to see if you get free rental car insurance. I received free insurance through American Express and this led to considerable cost savings on each car. Bring your own GPS or use your smartphone rather than paying the rental agency for one of their outdated, overpriced models. If using your phone, make sure you have a car charger as the GPS app will drain your battery quickly. Voice-guided turn-by-turn directions and automatic direction “recalculation” are absolutely crucial when navigating new cities and unfamiliar areas by yourself. If using an iPhone, beware that the default Apple Maps app may lead you astray. I would highly recommend the free alternative, Google Maps, which offers much more reliable directions. Finally, do not pre-pay for the tank of gas as you are unlikely to use the entire tank. Tell them you will fill it back up prior to returning the vehicle and you should be set.

Trains

Trains can be a money-saving option where they are available, especially in the Northeast. I heard of other applicants using this option, but I ended up utilizing rental cars instead.

Hotels

You will need a place to spend the night before an early interview. First, try to think of any friends or relatives you may have living in the city. If you don't know anyone around the area, the next option for Iowa students is the alumni host program. In this program, you apply for host positions in a given city and they will attempt to match you with an Iowa medical alumni who lives there. I initially thought this would be an awkward experience, but it was absolutely amazing. My hosts consistently exceeded my expectations by doing things like cooking meals and offering to provide any transportation I may need. They were all very kind and I would highly recommend the program as a way to gain insider advice on a city and to save money. If you end up using this program, please remember to write your hosts a thank you note and update them

with your eventual match results. They will surely be curious and it's the least you can do in exchange for their hospitality.

Residency programs usually recommend a hotel which is located near the hospital. This may be the most convenient, but you can usually save a considerable amount of money if you look elsewhere. Similar to rental cars, I recommend using Priceline or Hotwire. With these services, you will end up with a highly discounted hotel room in your chosen region of the city. Again, Hotwire provides prices on their website while Priceline lets you name the price you are willing to pay. Using these websites you can often book 3 ½ to 4-star hotel rooms for \$50 or less.

Some of the recommended hotels will advertise free hospital shuttles. This seems attractive, but the interviews often start around 7-7:30 am, and the shuttles are often not running early enough for you to make it in time, so be sure to inquire about this when booking the hotel.

The Rank List

In early January, you must submit a rank list placing programs in the order you would like to attend them. You can only include programs at which you interviewed. Residency programs also rank all of their interviewees in a similar fashion. This all gets sorted out by a computer system to make everyone as happy as possible. Theoretically, you could match at any program on your list, so do not list any program where you absolutely would not want to go. That being said, the only way you can match with the programs at the end of your list is if the algorithm did not match you with any of the programs you ranked above them. Therefore, if you end up matching at those programs you would not have matched at all if you had not ranked them. Personally, I would have rather matched at my lowest-ranked program than to not have matched anywhere at all.

The Match Algorithm

The match process happens using a specific algorithm. Understanding the algorithm is key to structuring your rank list. I will attempt to explain the algorithm using an example scenario:

John is an ophthalmology applicant and has ranked Program A #1, Program B #2, and Program C #3. Let's say John is the very first person the match algorithm considers when it begins processing its data. Because he ranked Program A #1, he will be placed in the #1 spot on their match list as long as that program ranked him *anywhere* in their

list. Jane also ranked Program A #1. Unfortunately for John, Program A ranked Jane higher than him, so he is moved to their #2 match spot and Jane replaces him at #1. Several more applicants rank Program A #1 and they were all ranked higher than John by the residency program. The program only has 4 residency positions, so John is moved off the program's match list. The algorithm now goes back to John and sees he ranked Program B #2. It tries to put him on their match list, but they have already been filled by applicants who were ranked higher than John. Finally, the algorithm assesses Program C, which John ranked #3. Program C ranked John #1 on their match list, so it is impossible that he will be bumped off the list by anybody else. After the algorithm is complete, John matches at Program C.

This all means that you are not penalized for ranking dream programs above more realistic programs. If you do not match at your #1 rank, the algorithm simply moves down to your #2 as if that program was your #1. This is how the program favors applicants over residency programs.

Detailed match statistics are not provided by the SF Match, but results may be generalized from the NRMP which uses the same algorithm. According to the 2015 NRMP data, 51.6% of matched U.S. seniors ended up at their first choice while 78.4% matched in one of their top 3 choices (Figure 4) (9).

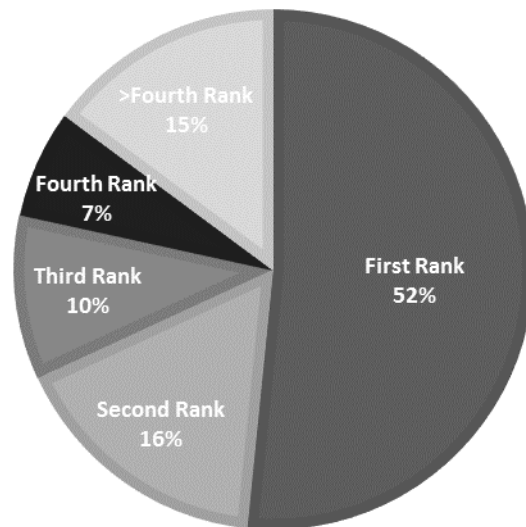


Figure 4. Overall percentage of U.S. senior matches by applicant choice in the 2015 National Resident Matching Program (NRMP) residency match (9).

The Match

Ophthalmology Match Day takes place in mid January. Unfortunately, it has very little hype as we are the only specialty that matches on that day. I was surprised to find out that most applicants actually end up having to attend their scheduled clerkships as usual.

Applicants can expect an email the morning prior to Match Day stating whether they matched, but not giving any information about specific programs. In 2013, this email was sent at exactly 6:00 am CST. Program directors are typically notified of who matched at their program one hour later and are free to notify these people at any time afterward. This means you may get a call or email as early as 7:00 am CST from your future program director. Match results are then posted on the SF Match website the following morning on the official Ophthalmology Match Day.

Matching into ophthalmology lets a huge weight off your shoulders, but unfortunately, you will have to wait for the main Match Day in March to find out where you are going for your intern year (unless you were fortunate enough to match at a program with an integrated internship). Even so, the hard part is over and you can enjoy the rest of your fourth year without worrying about honoring every class.

I'd like to give a special thanks to Erin Boese, MD for her contributions. The application and interview process is perpetually changing. Please contact me with any questions, comments, or corrections at jesse-vislisel@uiowa.edu.

Useful Links

Writing Samples - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/writingsamples/>
CV Samples - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/cv/>
Personal Statement Samples -
<http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/personalstatements/>
AOA requirements - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/aoa/>
Research Distinction Track - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/researchtrack/>
Service Distinction Track - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/service/>
Teaching Distinction Track - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/teachingregs/>
Humanities Distinction Track - <http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/humanities/>
Global Health Distinction Track –
http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/md/Global_Health_Distinction/
SF Match - <http://www.sfmatch.org/residency/ophthalmology/index.htm>
ERAS - <https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/>
Application Date Timetable:
http://www.sfmatch.org/residency/ophthalmology/getting_started/timetable.htm
FREIDA Program List - <https://freida.ama-assn.org/Freida/user/viewProgramSearch.do>
Student Doctor Network - <http://forums.studentdoctor.net/forumdisplay.php?f=47>
Eye Rounds - <http://webeye.ophth.uiowa.edu/eyeforum/>
Scutwork Program Reviews - <http://www.scutwork.com/>
MatchApplicants Program Info - <http://ophthalmology.matchapplicants.com/select.php>
Minnesota Medical Student Guide to the Ophthalmology Match -
http://www.ophthalmology.umn.edu/prod/groups/med/@pub/@med/@ophth/documents/content/med_content_481731.pdf

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