

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. Many consider vision the most prized of the senses, therefore ophthalmologists can make a tremendous impact on the lives of their patients. The ophthalmology application and match process are fairly unique, because it is coordinated by the San Francisco Matching Program (SF Match) rather than the Electronic Residency Application Service (ERAS) like most other specialties. As a result, the field has its own separate application process, deadlines, and Match Day. This guide attempts to consolidate the most important information in hopes that it will make your life easier during your preparation, application process, and interviews. While preparing our own applications, we gathered information from peers, residents, faculty, websites, and books.

Ophthalmology is a competitive specialty, although perhaps less so than it has been in the past. In 2020, there were 635 applicants for 496 positions with an overall match rate of 67% for all Match registrants. For those who submitted a rank list (and therefore attended at least one interview), the overall match rate was 78%. The good news is U.S. medical seniors have a match rate which is much higher than these figures (86%). [1] 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 practice 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 et al. surveyed residency programs in 2010 to analyze trends in the residency selection process. 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. With the paradigm shift in Step 1 scoring to pass/fail in January 2022, it will likely be more important than ever to display your academic excellence via routes aside from standardized tests.

COVID-19 and Virtual Interviews

The 2021 cycle took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewing went virtual, and although many of the same questions were covered, it was in many ways a different experience than in-person interviews. Virtual interviews allowed applicants to apply to more programs than in the past due to the absence of time and travel cost constraints. Applicants were also permitted to schedule two interviews on the same day (one morning, one afternoon), and SF Match placed a cap of 20 interviews per applicant. The 2021 Match Summary Report showed that the cap did not significantly affect the number of interviews per matched and unmatched individual. [3] The AUPO (Association of University Professors of Ophthalmology) announced that the 2021-2022 cycle would also be virtual, and they further reduced the interview cap to 18. [4]

Since you won't be spending on flights, gas, and hotels, practical investments for virtual interviewing include a ring light, a high-quality webcam, reliable WiFi, and an interesting background. Whatever your lighting source is, make sure it is in front of you rather than behind you. Most will agree that your virtual background should *not* be a blank wall. Instead, use this as a non-verbal opportunity to tell the interviewer something about you, whether it's a picture of family, a poster of a favorite movie, or plants galore! We also recommend dressing up fully for your interview (yes, that means no sweats) to internalize that you are participating in an extremely important interview, rather than just another Zoom call. You never know if an interviewer will ask you to stand up to teach them something or show them an item listed in your hobbies section of your application – always be prepared and dress appropriately.

We also recommend keeping your phone within reach during virtual interviews. Should anything happen to your internet connection mid-way through the interview, programs will sometimes call you on the phone to complete the interview. It is also helpful to have a phone hotspot as an alternative source of internet connection.

Finally, in lieu of the dinners and resident socials that programs used to hold during in-person interviews, many programs will host virtual webinars and “open-houses” where applicants can attend an online meeting to learn more about the program from administrators, faculty, and residents. Many programs publicly state that your attendance or lack thereof does not influence them when making rank lists. Although there is no way to know how true this is, your presence at the webinar is a very small factor, if any, compared to your performance at the interview. SF Match also designates time after the interview season where applicants may attend optional in-person visits to programs they are interested in to better inform their own rank list. These “second-looks” occur *after* programs have submitted their rank list, so whether you visit or not does not bias a program. You may only attend these in-person visits for those programs at which you interviewed.

Phase 1: Preclinical Years

Preclinical Course Grades

It is important to study diligently for your basic science courses during your first and second years of medical school and, if your school does not use pass/fail for preclinicals, 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 2010 study), they will still appear on your transcript. [2] Furthermore, they can be 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 and Step 2 Board Exams.

Extracurricular Activities

Grades are important, but residency programs also want well-rounded and interesting residents. It is recommended applicants choose several extracurricular activities to pursue. These may include student organizations, student government, tutoring, service projects, or other activities. Ophthalmology-related groups at the Carver College of Medicine (CCOM) include ReSpectacle, UI Sight, Free Eye Clinic, and Ophthalmology Interest Group. These groups provide early opportunities to practice exam skills and engage with ophthalmology residents. There are many non-specialty-specific volunteer opportunities available in the Iowa City area, and research positions are plentiful as a medical student. Of note, it is not necessary to do research with ophthalmology faculty, although this can be useful later on for recommendation letters.

If you are a student at Iowa, you should pursue one of the [Research](#), [Service](#), [Humanities](#), [Healthcare Delivery Science Management & Policy](#) (HDSM), [Teaching](#), or [Global Health](#) Distinction Tracks to gain official recognition for your activities. Many of these tracks require early interest, so do not wait to join a track until your second year! The summer between your first and second years is a great time to work on a Distinction Track project.

Finally, apply for scholarships as they are available. There is a rather large section on the SF Match application specifically asking for awards you have received and activities that you have participated in. It is best to get involved with these activities early as time does not become any more abundant during your core clerkships.

Phase 2: Core Clerkships

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 a good grade in your ophthalmology rotation. If you are undecided and want a glimpse of ophthalmology early on, we recommend taking your 2-week ophthalmology selective earlier on in during your core clerkships. However, some students prefer to schedule ophthalmology in the second half of the year. You will have become accustomed to the hospital during other less-crucial rotations, yet still get a sense of ophthalmology early enough 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 may even be your future mentors.

USMLE Step 1 Board Exam

Before you start your advanced clerkships at Iowa, you must take and pass the USMLE Step 1 Board Exam. Previously, your score on this exam was extraordinarily important when pursuing a competitive specialty. [2,5] For example, many programs have used this score as a screen to determine which applications to review: Nallasamy, et al. 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] In light of this data, the switch to pass/fail grading of Step 1 as of January 2022 is particularly relevant for ophthalmology. The average Step 1 score of matched applicants has steadily risen (245 in 2020), and it is significantly higher than the national average (232) or minimum passing score (194). [1,6]

In the 2021 and 2022 Match cycles, all applicants will have a traditional three-digit Step 1 score. In the 2023 cycle, many students will have a Step 1 score while others, such as CCOM students, will take the exam on a pass/fail basis. Although Step 1 is transitioning to pass/fail, it will still be important to learn the information well due to the considerable overlap in content between Step 1 and Step 2 CK (which will still be scored for all residency applicants).

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 meeting helps introduce you to the department, and he or she can assess your competitiveness for the specialty. You should provide him or her with a CV and transcript to help with this process. Doing this earlier in your third year leaves you with time to buff out any potential weaknesses in your application before applying to 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, Dr. Tom Oetting, and Dr. Pavlina Kemp. Make sure you come prepared with specific discussion points, questions, or material to review. You want to make efficient use of your time and theirs.

Phase 3: Advanced Clerkships

Advanced Electives

Most students choose to schedule one or two ophthalmology electives early in Phase 3 as this allows them to obtain a letter of recommendation from a faculty member before submitting applications. At CCOM, 4-week clinical ophthalmology rotations include External Eye Disease (Cornea), Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery (with faculty permission), Neuro-ophthalmology, and the VA. Other advanced electives include Research in Ophthalmology, Molecular Ophthalmology, and Ocular Pathology. You may also arrange personalized rotations in nearly any department if you contact the medical education coordinator, Dr. Pavlina Kemp, with adequate advanced notice and a plan. There is no significant benefit to doing more than one or two clinical rotations—you will have all of residency to explore the field!

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 away clerkship, you may actually hurt your chances of being offered an interview.

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.

If your institution is home to an outstanding ophthalmology program, away rotations are even less imperative. While no program director will question your choice if you snag an away at another highly ranked program, they may overlook your application if you rotate at a significantly lower-ranked program as an indication that you intend to go to that institution.

Time Off

If you are an Iowa student, you will want to schedule time off during interview season. CCOM offers a total of 16 flex weeks (vacation) to be used throughout Phases 2 and 3. The majority of these weeks are used for interview season, Spring M4, and dedicated study time for board exams (excluding the 4 weeks of Step 1 dedicated time built into the curriculum). If you absolutely do not wish to use your flex weeks for interviews, you may be able to arrange for a more flexible rotation during this time, such as an individually arranged research elective, although 40 hours/week of research time are still expected even when interviewing.

USMLE Step 2 Board Exam

Students must take Step 2 Clinical Knowledge (CK) during their Advanced Year. Scheduling this exam is currently done on an individual basis.

For those with a scored Step 1: If you did well on Step 1, we would advise you to delay taking Step 2 CK until later in the year (i.e. October to 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. However, keep in mind that interviewers may ask you for your score. Most people study at least 2 weeks for the CK exam.

For those with pass/fail Step 1: We recommend taking Step 2 CK within 3 months of taking Step 1. There is significant overlap in the exam content and internal CCOM data show that students score significantly higher on Step 2 if taken within this time frame. A three-digit Step 2 CK score provides an objective measure to program directors of your medical knowledge.

Curriculum Vitae

Begin preparing your CV 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. 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. This CV does not need to be limited to activities only in medical school; give your letter writers a more holistic picture of your professional journey. 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. CCOM has an excellent [website](#) containing several example CV's.

Letters of Recommendation

During your advanced clerkships, think 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 CV and transcript so they have even more information on which to base the letter. You will need 3 letters for your ophthalmology application. The SF Match system will allow you to upload more than 3 letters and tailor which letters are sent to which institution, should you desire to customize a given application. One letter must be from an ophthalmologist, but many students obtain two from ophthalmology faculty and one from a faculty member in another department to diversify your application. Another framework to use is to have 1 letter each describing your strengths in (1) clinical skills (e.g. from a Medicine Sub-Internship), (2) interest in ophthalmology (e.g. from an advanced ophthalmology elective), and (3) research (whether in ophthalmology or not).

Do your writers a favor and ask them for the letters *at least* a month or two before you need them (July/August for a September application due date) so they are not forced to write them on short notice. If possible, alert your attending at the *beginning* of a month-long rotation that you are interested in having them write a letter for you so that they can pay special interest throughout the month. If you are planning on asking someone with whom you worked early in your third year, such as a later core clerkship, 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.

Alpha Omega Alpha (AOA)

AOA Honor Society status is awarded in two waves – one in Spring of your third year and one in late Summer of your fourth year. 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 Central Application Service (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 1) [5].

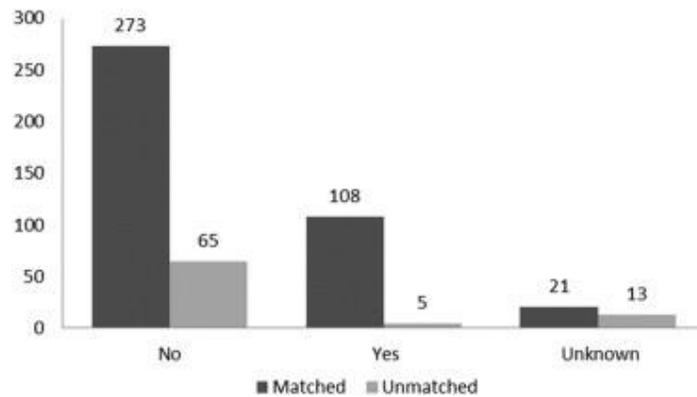


Figure 1. Ophthalmology match results by AOA Honor Society membership (2011). [5]

EyeRounds

The University of Iowa Department of Ophthalmology maintains an excellent website called [EyeRounds](#). 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. We would recommend writing at least one article during medical school. EyeRounds is an exclusive opportunity for students at CCOM, as you must attend the University of Iowa to submit materials for the site. Residents often have potential cases in mind; contact one of the residents that you meet during your rotations if you are interested.

The Application Process

Residency Overview

Ophthalmology residencies are 3 years in length with 1 year of general medical or general surgery internship before you may begin. The ACGME has asked that all programs offer joint (IM/surgery department-led) or integrated (ophthalmology department-led) programs for their PGY-1s by 2023. This change eliminates the need to move twice for residency and may allow future applicants to avoid the hassle of a separate ERAS application process for a preliminary or transitional year. Instead, you will complete your intern year at the same institution as your ophthalmology training.

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

SF Match Profile & CAS Application

You can start your application on the SF Match website on July 1, 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 Central Application System (CAS) application.

The [2020 SF Match Demo Webinar](#) is a great resource to view the steps of filling out the 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. You can indicate your gender identity. This information is collected for SF Match to assess demographics of applicants and is not shared with programs. Your photo is used as a visual reminder when programs are making their rank lists, but it is not seen until after you have been invited for an interview; many programs require this photo as a supplement before they will review your application. If you are concerned about getting your photo uploaded in time, 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. 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. The sections of the CAS application are:

- **Personal information:** employment, publications, presentations, etc.
- **Honors/interests:** awards, hobbies, unpublished research activities, other achievements, some even include honors on specific rotations

- **Career objectives:** a short statement about your career goals which might include interest in academia versus private practice, research, and fellowships. 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
- **Specialty-related electives and activities**
- **Public service and activities**
- **Self-identification as URM** (optional checkbox): AAO hosts a Minority Ophthalmology Mentoring (MOM) program for applicants who identify as Black or African American, Hispanic, or Latino, and/or Native American (American Indian/Alaska Native/Native Hawaiian) to increase the diversity in the field of ophthalmology. These students are eligible for one-on-one mentoring to help them be competitive residency applicants.

The earliest date residency programs can view your application is in early September. There is no advantage to submitting your application before the designated date, as applications will not be released before then. However, some programs have later deadlines – these details can be found on SF Match or the program’s website. 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 the final PDF version programs will be seeing. 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 -- make this person’s life easy. It is important to carefully organize your information, include dates, and be concise. Avoid full paragraphs for the majority of your application. You can copy and paste bullets from Microsoft Word, use hyphens as bullets, or utilize a combination of both for multi-leveled lists. The only section that warrants a full paragraph, in our opinion, is the “Career Objectives” section. Current residents are a great fund of knowledge about the general application process and examples of successful CAS applications. Often, they may be willing to share their past application with you as a guide.

Additional Documents to Upload

Autobiographical Statement

In 2021, the AUPO announced that it will replace the traditional personal statement (PS) with a shorter autobiographical statement (500 words) and your choice of two personal short-answer questions (250 words each). The options for short-answer questions include: [4]

1. What does resilience mean to you? Describe a situation in your personal or professional life where you have demonstrated resilience.

2. Describe an important mentor and relate how that person has been helpful to you.
3. Describe a way in which you will add diversity to your residency class. This may relate to your background, upbringing, life experiences, professional/personal interest, or educational path.
4. If you were to start an ophthalmology residency program, what would be the three core values you would base it on?

The autobiographical statement is similar to the traditional PS, as they both consist of a single page capturing your unique background, describing who you are, your aspirations, and your path to ophthalmology. This statement is an opportunity to grab the attention of the person reading your application, but do not go too far with your creativity. It is often better to not take too many chances as it can cause you to stand out in an unfavorable way. 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. Your goal is to generate a desire in the reader 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 of a resident and future ophthalmologist such as intelligence, fine motor skills, attention to detail, self-driven learning, 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, and ask for opinions from both people familiar with ophthalmology (especially with the admissions process) and people familiar with you. When you think you are done, put your statement down for a week, then revise it again. The PS is a very important piece of your application package, and you want it to leave a lasting impression. CCOM has PS advice and examples at their [website](#). Remember, ERAS will still require a traditional PS, so you are not fully off the hook from preparing this important document.

Sounding unoriginal or overly flowery in your personal/autobiographical statement ("the eye is the window to the soul...") may easily disadvantage your application. If you do have a visual disability or problems with fine stereopsis and depth perception, please discuss this with a trusted ophthalmologist, as this may impact your surgical ability and fit for the field. Be very careful about how you word each sentence and the conclusion to which a critical reader may jump. Those reviewing your 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 *o-p-h-t-h-a-l-m-o-l-o-g-y!*

Letters of Recommendation

You can only send three letters to each program but can request as many letters as you wish. You can pick and choose which letters you want sent to specific programs. At least one letter from an ophthalmologist is required. Most choose to send 2 ophthalmology letters and 1 non-ophthalmology letter, while some choose to send 3 ophthalmology letters. You will initiate a letter request through the SF Match

website and your letter writers will upload their submissions directly; you will be able to see when these have been uploaded. Make sure to “check” the box waiving your right to view the letter. Remember to thank your letter writers and keep them updated with where you match!

Transcripts

The SF Match requires applicants to obtain and upload official transcripts for all undergraduate, graduate, and medical schools they have attended. 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, there is no need to request a transcript for a SCUBA certification course, even if it was for college credit).

USMLE Board Scores

You must also include a copy of all USMLE scores you have received thus far. Upload the free student print-out, including the score breakdown, that is available by logging in to the USMLE website. This is the same PDF report you checked to discover your score(s) for the first time.

Additionally, USMLE 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. However, this calculus may change or not be an option after Step 1 becomes pass-fail.

AOA Induction Letter

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

Program Supplements

There are some programs that will ask for supplemental information, such as a CV, short essay indicating interest, and even a recent eye exam with color vision testing. You can list personal ties to a geographic area in this portion, if applicable, however make sure to also include a separate interest in their program, such as a specific mentor or institution-specific opportunity.

Submission

Each year a “target date” in late August or early September is provided on a timetable posted on the SF Match website. Programs individually set deadlines, and some are as quite early, so make sure to find the dates for the programs to which you are applying!

Dean's Letter (MSPE)

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 years 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 (late September). Although this letter was previously frequently overlooked, it has become more important as the number of applicants per program has substantially increased over time.

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 (Table 1). 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.

No. Programs	Cost
1 - 10	\$60 total
11 - 20	\$10 per program
21 - 30	\$15 per program
31 - 40	\$20 per program
41+	\$35 per program

Table 1. SF Match CAS distribution fees. [7]

Choosing Ophthalmology Programs

Selecting the programs to which you should send your application can be a daunting task. There are currently between 120 and 130 ophthalmology residency programs in the country (search [Doximity](#) for a complete list). If you can hone in on a specific geographic region or two, 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 Reddit's [r/medicalschooll](#) and [r/ophthalmology](#), [TexasStar](#) data, and the annual OphthoMatch [Google Sheets](#). You should also use department websites to learn about what specific programs have to offer.

U.S. News & World Report continues to rate ophthalmology clinics annually, but it does not specifically rank residency programs (Table 2). [8] Doximity and the *Ophthalmology Times* rank residency programs based on a number of factors, including research, patient care, and teaching (Tables 3 and 4). [9-10] 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.

1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Univ. of Miami	6. University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics	11. New York Eye & Ear Mount Sinai Hospitals
2. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson	7. Duke University Eye Center	12. Roski Eye Institute Univ. of Southern California
3. Wilmer Eye Institute Johns Hopkins	8. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan	13. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah
4. Mass. Eye & Ear Harvard	9. UCSF Medical Center	
5. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA	10. Cole Eye Institute Cleveland Clinic	

Table 2. *U.S. News & World Report* best hospitals for ophthalmology, 2020 [8]

1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Univ. of Miami	6. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah
2. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson	7. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan
3. University of Iowa Hospitals & Clinics	8. Mass. Eye & Ear Harvard
4. Wilmer Eye Institute Johns Hopkins	9. Duke University Eye Center
5. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA	10. Cullen Eye Institute Baylor College of Medicine

Table 3. Doximity residency program rankings, 2020 [9]

Best Overall	Best Research	Best Clinical Care	Best Residency
1. Wilmer Eye Institute (tie) Johns Hopkins	1. Wilmer Eye Institute Johns Hopkins	1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Univ. of Miami	1. Bascom Palmer Eye Institute Univ. of Miami
1. Bascom Palmer (tie) Univ. of Miami	2. Mass. Eye & Ear Harvard	2. Wilmer Eye Institute Johns Hopkins	2. Mass Eye & Ear Harvard
3. Mass. Eye & Ear Harvard	3. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan	3. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson	3. Wilmer Eye Institute Johns Hopkins
4. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan	4. Bascom Palmer Univ. of Miami	4. Massachusetts Eye & Ear Harvard	4. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson
5. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson	5. Duke University Eye Center	5. University of Iowa	5. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan
6. Duke University Eye Center	6. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA	6. WK Kellogg Eye Center Univ. of Michigan	6. University of Iowa
7. University of Iowa	7. Casey Eye Institute Univ. of Oregon	7. Duke University Eye Center	7. Duke University Eye Center
8. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA	8. Cole Eye Institute Cleveland Clinic	8. Cole Eye Institute Cleveland Clinic	8. Casey Eye Institute Univ. of Oregon
9. Casey Eye Institute Univ. of Oregon	9. Byers Eye Stanford	9. Casey Eye Institute Univ. of Oregon	9. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah
10. Cole Eye Institute Cleveland Clinic	10. University of Iowa	10. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA	10. Stein & Doheny Eye UCLA
11. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah	11. Wills Eye Hospital Thomas Jefferson	11. Emory Eye Care Center	11. Cole Eye Institute Cleveland Clinic
12. Byers Eye Stanford	12. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah	12. Moran Eye Center Univ. of Utah	12. Rocky Mountains Lions Eye Institute Univ. of Colorado

Table 4. *Ophthalmology Times* residency program rankings, 2020 [10]

You can find 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. Pavlina Kemp 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 can apply to safety schools and be confident you will 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. You want to diversify between program strength to a certain extent, but your program list needs to be matched to your application strength. 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.*

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. In most circumstances, programs like applicants that show some interest in academics. There is also a section of your application asking what your aspirations are as a future physician.

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. The average number of applications per matched individual are 77 and 80 in 2020 and 2021, respectively. (Figure 2). [1,3] Depending on how competitive your application is, it may be a worthwhile investment to apply to a higher-than-average number of programs to increase your odds of receiving a sufficient number of interview offers. Discussing your application's competitiveness with a trusted ophthalmology mentor can help you have a realistic view of how many programs to which you should apply.

Application and Position Summary

	2019	2020	2021
AVG # APPLICATIONS PER MATCHED INDIVIDUAL	75	77	80
AVG # APPLICATIONS PER UNMATCHED INDIVIDUAL	71	77	78
AVG # INTERVIEW INVITES PER MATCHED INDIVIDUAL	12	12	12
AVG # INTERVIEW INVITES PER UNMATCHED INDIVIDUAL	4	4	5
TOTAL # POSITIONS OFFERED	485	496	499
TOTAL # POSITIONS FILLED	484	495	498
TOTAL NUMBER OF UNFILLED POSITIONS	1	1	1

Figure 2. Summary of number of applications and positions for 2019-2021 [3]

Choosing Programs for Intern Year

The ACGME has mandated that by July 2023 all US ophthalmology programs are to provide a joint or integrated program for PGY-1. This is wonderful, as future applicants no longer have to apply to ophthalmology programs AND preliminary/transitional year programs, which saves time and money!

Previously, only a few ophthalmology programs in the country, including the University of Iowa, had integrated intern years. The transition to joint and integrated

programs is a tremendous advantage in many ways. You will have an entire year to familiarize yourself with the location, hospital systems, and electronic medical record, prior to starting ophthalmology 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.

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. Do everything you can to schedule time off during this period, as you will be busy dedicating significant time to interviewing.

Master Calendar

Starting with the 2021 interview cycle, the SF match has implemented a new Interview Scheduler program to post interview dates and schedule applicants. We recommend watching this [webinar](#) by the SF match to familiarize yourself with the interviewer scheduler. Interview offers will arrive via the SF Match Portal: we strongly recommend you can set up automatic forwarding to your email for SF Match notifications in order to respond in a timely manner. Scheduling occurs via the SF Match Portal, and NOT by simply replying to an email. The HUGE advantage to this system is that programs will only extend the number of interview invitations they can accommodate, so you won't be fighting tooth and nail to say **YES** to that coveted interview spot. That being said, you should still check your email as frequently as you can because you want the first pick at the available interview dates and times!

Programs have limited dates available and they fill up *ridiculously* fast. This means you need to be on your toes, ready to respond quickly 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. 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 is to create a unique email address exclusively for the SF Match website and other interview-related activities. Remove all other email accounts from your phone so you know that every email alert concerns an interview. If you do receive an interview offer during the day, politely excuse yourself from whatever you are doing and sign up for a date on your phone. Do not put off your reply, or the most coveted dates *will* fill.

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. In previous years, spreadsheets with a compiled list of every program's interview dates have been posted to the ophthalmology applicant google spreadsheet. 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 interview at all of your top choices.

With in-person interviews, 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.

There is some debate over scheduling earlier 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. 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 reiterate 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 the ophthalmology google spreadsheet where applicants work out personal trades with each other and simply contact the program to inform them of the change.

Interview Number

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. However, there are diminishing returns after a submitting your application to a certain number of programs, particularly beyond the range of 41-60. [11] If you decide to cancel an interview, both cancel through the SF Match Portal **and** send a personal email to the program director (and express your gratitude). 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. Ophthalmology is a small community: if you make a bad impression with a program, you never know if word will travel to another institution, and you may face repercussions if you decide to apply for a fellowship down the road.

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 online can be anxiety inducing, it is particularly useful to see when individual programs have begun sending interviews 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. The earliest you can hear from a program is mid-October, however interview offers continue through the 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 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. The majority of interviewers 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 institutions. 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.

Interviewing

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 1:1 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. If your interview cycle is virtual, it would be prudent to keep your phone within reach during interviews. Should anything happen to your internet connection mid-way through the interview, programs will sometimes call you on the phone to complete the interview. It is also helpful to have a phone hotspot as an alternative source of internet connection.

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 pimped 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 another 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 that 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 would you like to see out of a co-resident? How do you display those traits?
- What does success mean to you?
- Teach me something.
- 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 book you read for leisure?
- 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. The best way to get honest answers to sensitive questions about a program is to reach out to recent alumni of that program and ask for some of their time.

In-Person 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, lip balm, mints, hair ties, extra hose, contact lens solution, Tylenol, toiletries, and cough drops. Don't forget to discreetly carry your phone so you can send stealthy replies to other invitations during any downtime you may have.

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. You can't hurt yourself by sending them, 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 thank you notes and either email or send them by snail mail. 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. This is often colloquially called a "love letter" or "letter of intent." Again, I don't think this can hurt you as long as you are sincere in your claims. However, if you send a letter of intent to an institution that ranks you number 1 expecting to match you and you end up matching at a different institution, they will know that you have not been honest, and you will have burned a bridge.

In-Person Dinners & 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 socials 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, however 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.

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 in the worst way.

Travel

The interview trail can be incredibly expensive, so you want to find the best travel deals possible. During in-person interviews, 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 [12]. 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.

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. You will also then have time to explore the region. If you do have to miss an interview secondary to unavoidable travel problems, just let the program coordinator know. 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, including Google Flights, which allows you to compare different airlines easily. 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 or Des Moines than Cedar Rapids. 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 Google Flights, including the beloved Southwest Airlines. If you are flying from Cedar Rapids or smaller and less popular airports across the country, budget airlines such as Frontier and Allegiant offer amazing prices to limited destinations, but they have very few scheduling options and can experience more significant delays than larger airlines. It is worthwhile to check 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. Of note for University of Iowa students, the closest airports where Southwest is available are Des Moines (~2 hours) and Chicago (~3.5 hours), so take the drive into consideration when planning flight times.

If you have to catch a plane the evening after an interview, let the program coordinator know as soon as you have your flight scheduled, 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. Most airlines will also allow you to bring your suit in a garment bag and hang it in their coat closet; double check with your airline first before you run into unnecessary stress! I ended up wearing my jacket and folding the pants carefully at 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. Additionally, many will take advantage of the stellar travel bonuses offered with opening credit cards, with the most popular being Chase Sapphire Preferred and Chase Sapphire Reserve. These credit cards offer up to \$750 in travel rewards after spending a certain amount, which will (unfortunately) be easily attainable with applications and interview travel quickly adding up.

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 can typically easily find an Uber/Lyft to your destination. However, do be mindful that these services tend to be less plentiful in smaller, rural destinations, especially during bad weather and very early/late hours. Airport shuttles are another option if they are available to your hotel. One travel hack is to stay at a hotel that offers free shuttles that can pick you up from the airport and possibly drop you off at your interview, depending on how far it is. Some of the 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.

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 that 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. If using your phone, make sure you have a car charger, as the Apple or Google Maps app will drain your battery quickly. 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.

Alternative forms of travel

Other than flying or driving, trains and buses are a good option in many parts of the country. Trains like Amtrak are particularly useful and a faster means of transportation in the Northeast than dealing with the airport madness. Remember to book these in

advance too because prices will go up closer to your travel date! Another personal favorite of mine are buses like Megabus, Windstar, and Greyhound, if you have some time in between interviews. These buses typically stop at many airports and can be as cheap as \$5 one-way.

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 alumnus 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 Hotels Tonight smartphone app, Priceline, or Hotwire. With these services, you will end up with a highly discounted hotel room in your chosen region of the city. Hotels Tonight offers incredible prices, since hotels want to get rid of their unsold rooms. 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.

AirBnB is also a great option to save money. You can choose to stay with locals who can answer your questions about the city, culture, food scene, etc., which could be much more valuable than staying at a hotel. Depending on the city, you can typically find AirBnBs for significantly cheaper than a hotel would cost. However, you may be staying with other people in AirBnBs, so be cautious with this option if you are a light sleeper.

The Match

Submitting a Rank List

In early February, 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 programs you were more interested in were not equally interested in you. Therefore, the only alternative to matching at a less desirable program is not matching. Personally, I would have rather matched at my lowest-ranked program than to not have matched anywhere at all.

When compiling your rank list, it is important to consider your priorities and what the “best fit” program will be for you. Do you enjoy more autonomy or hand-holding and guidance? Big city with lots of competition or rural programs with high catchment? Call hours? Support from the program director and faculty? There are many factors to consider aside from rankings and prestige. Talking to as many residents from different programs as possible will give you a feel for factors that may not be apparent to a medical student and how to best assess them. As social time with residents on the interview trail is often in a group setting, reaching out to residents or fellows one-on-one on a separate occasion from the interview day might give you the best opportunity for a candid conversation.

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 ultimately 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 applicant preferences over residency program preferences.

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 2020 NRMP data, 42% of matched U.S. seniors ended up at their first choice while 70% matched in one of their top 3 choices. [1] With COVID changes and virtual interviews for the 2020 interview cycle, the percentage of applicants matching at their 1st choice and in one of their top 3 choices decreased to 38% and 67%, respectively (Figure 3). [3] SF Match creates these graphs -- the links to both 2020 and 2021 data are references (1) and (3), respectively.

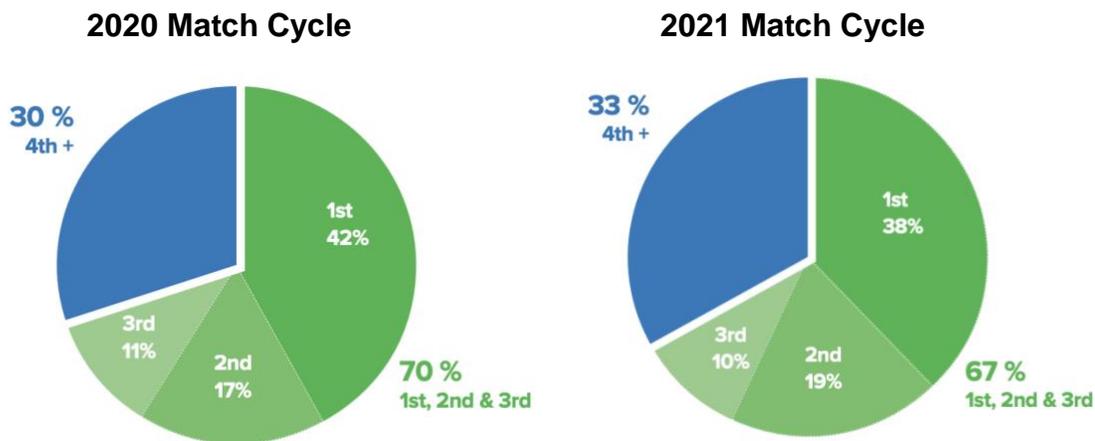


Figure 3. Overall percentage of U.S. senior matches by their rank choice in the 2020 and 2021 cycles [1,3]

Match Day

Ophthalmology Match Day takes place in early February. It is a much more low-key affair than the main match day. Applicants can expect an email the morning of Match Day stating whether they matched and where. 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 lifts a huge weight off of your shoulders. The hard part is over, and you can enjoy the rest of your fourth year!

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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/>

Alpha Omega Alpha - <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/teachingreqs/>

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>

ERAS - <https://www.aamc.org/students/medstudents/eras/>

FREIDA Program List - <https://freida.ama-assn.org/>

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/>

Minnesota Medical Student Guide to the Ophthalmology Match -

<https://www.med.umn.edu/sites/med.umn.edu/files/uofminnesotaophthomatchguide.pdf>

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