

## **Step 5: Completing ERAS & Applying for Residency**

### **There are six tasks to accomplish in fourth year:**

**Step 1: Write your CV. Document what you have done thus far.**

Step 2: Choose a career. Choose wisely: this decision is for the rest of your life.

Step 3: Schedule your fourth year based upon your career.

Step 4: Write a personal statement

Step 5: Complete ERAS

Step 6: Interview and choose a residency.

Step 7: Squeeze the last juice from this orange you call medical school (See Step 3)

Step 8: Clean up details: i.e., take step II of the boards. (See Step 3)

Step 9: The Match

**This chapter will focus upon how to write your curriculum vitae (CV).**

### **I. Step 1: Choose your career.**

A. You must choose a career. The advice in this chapter is specific for different careers; having a career chosen will allow you to follow the right timeline and use the specific advice in this chapter.

B. Do not choose two careers and hope the match will decide for you. This decision is too important to leave to chance. If you are between two careers and you cannot decide, adopt the more competitive of the careers and proceed with the application process. It will be easier to switch over to a less-competitive later; it will be impossible to step up to a more competitive residency program.

### **II. Step II: Get your Documents in Order.**

There are seven components to the residency application.

#### A. Letters of recommendation

1. **Timeline:** Begin now. Ideally, this process should begin at the beginning of the third year as you do your rotations. The time to ask for a letter of recommendation is immediately after you work with someone with whom you resonate (and the person with whom you think resonates with you). The impression of the relationship will be no stronger than it is at that moment.

2. **Qualities of a good letter.** You are obviously not writing your own letters of recommendation, so it may seem irrelevant to hear about what

constitutes a good letter of recommendation. Understanding the components of a good letter will allow you to provide your letter writers what they need to satisfy these components, and it will help you choose people (see below) that can write this type of letter for you.

a. **Goals and motivations.** The most important part of good letter of recommendation is that it is **personal**. The reader of your letters of recommendation should get a sense that the writer personally knows you and is investing himself in your abilities by his endorsement of you. Personal anecdotes and comments on your goals and motivations speak to this. When you request letters (see below), schedule a time to sit down with the letter writer. During this discussion, provide him with a personal statement and your CV. It is important during this discussion that you communicate your goals and motivations. Even if you are still only partially sure of your career motivations, you must convey commitment and goal-directed behavior. The writer will be more confident of your abilities if he knows that you yourself are confident in your ability to do this job. Note the key point, however: you do not have to convey competence in the career (this will come off as arrogance), but rather commitment and desire. With these two attributes, you will become competent in the career, and the letter writer knows this. His letter will be stronger proportional to his confidence that you will ultimately be great in the career. Remember, an average letter of recommendation is a recommendation; a great letter of recommendation is an endorsement.

b. **Comments on good qualities and attributes.** During this time it is also important to remind him of the time you worked together. Think ahead of the attributes that make you great. You may not possess every attribute, but you possess some. The following are candidates: teamwork, motivation, industriousness, professionalism, sense of humor, talent, intelligence, interpersonal skills, bedside manner, responsibility, maturity, initiative, integrity, flexibility, dependability, accept criticism, knowledge, clinical reasoning. Select a few of these attributes and tell the letter writer (yes tell him) that you consider these your strongest points, and these are the attributes you will seek to make stronger during your residency training. (The second part of this sentence absolves the sense of arrogance that comes with blowing your own horn in elucidating your best attributes). Remind the letter writer of how these attributes were exemplified in your time together. For example, “I know there will be many qualified applicants out there, but I think my skills in teamwork, motivation, industriousness, and professionalism should make me competitive. These are the attributes I want to try to further develop during residency. I was wondering if in your letter you could talk about how these attributes were demonstrated during our time on the wards

together. I want a program that values these attributes.” He will naturally agree, since he will like the thought that it was he that noticed the attributes himself. To further help the letter writer, in your **auxiliary personal statement** (see below).

c. **Knowledge, application of this knowledge, and technical skill.** There is little to be done about this: your performance on the wards with the writer will have decided this. If you have scored high on the shelf exams, boards, etc., you should make your writer aware of this on your **auxiliary personal statement**. The same goes with additional training in procedural skills outside of your time with him (i.e., you did a month doing procedures on an anesthesia rotation or a pig/dog lab).

d. **Communication skills.** Sadly, this is the focus of many letters of recommendation since most faculty interact with students only in the setting of attending rounds. While communication is important, the line: “He gave organized oral presentations and a nice talk on acid-base.” Reads more like a ward evaluation than an endorsement of your abilities. The default will be for this to show up in your letter of recommendation: there is no need to emphasize this in your discussion. The goal is to have more than this in your letter.

e. **The best letters have superlatives in definitive time.** For example, “He was the best student I have seen in five years.” Nothing you can do about getting this line included in your letter; just so you know.

f. **Qualification of the author.** Surprisingly, this has little effect on the impact of the letter. This should remind you that it is much more important to have someone who knows you than to have someone the residency director knows.

### 3. How to ask for a letter of recommendation.

a. First, don't be embarrassed. This is asking for a favor, but the people from whom you are asking this favor are used to doing it each year. In part, it is a honor for them as well: endorsing greatness (especially if you ultimately become great) reflects upon their own greatness.

b. The way in which you ask the question is important, “Do you think you can write me a strong letter of recommendation for residency?” If the person is uncomfortable endorsing you, it is better to know that now.

c. Bring your CV with you. Faculty want their letters to be strong, but sometimes they run out of things to say. You want to empower them with the ability to do so. The CV helps, and it also puts a place-marker on their desk so that they remember to do it.

d. Give them other good things to say: the **auxiliary personal statement**. Do not bring the personal statement you will put on

ERAS as part of your application. Instead, bring a separate, different **auxiliary personal statement**. This should be a letter to your letter writer that is comprised of one or two paragraphs (short) that cuts to the chase: what about you warrants this person's endorsement. Include the attributes (see above) that were demonstrated while working with this attending. Highlight parts of your CV or curricular training (see above) that will make the letter writer more confident in endorsing you. Do not be self-effacing: this is the time to put it on the line. If you do not believe in your own ability to do this job, you cannot expect the letter-writer to endorse you. Make sure the faculty knows what your future goals and motivations are. The last paragraph of this auxiliary personal statement should be, "Thanks again for agreeing to write a letter of recommendation for me. I know I have a long way to go in my development, and I hope I can find a program that will help me further strengthen these above attributes and skills. Let me know if you need more information, and thanks again." Sign it. The last line will absolve you of arrogance in writing about your own strengths.

5. Who should write your letters of recommendation. You should have three letters of recommendation in addition to the dean's letter.

a. Department Chair. It is a good idea to meet with the chairman of the department and request a letter from him. In all specialties, the tightest level of politics is between chairman of different programs. If there is a question about you (i.e., If a program director wants to know where to rank you), the most likely communication will be between your department chairman and the chairman from the residency at which you applied. For this reason, it is important that the chairman has met you. It is unlikely that the chairman has worked with you, however, so you have to work twice as hard at empowering him with the ability to write a good letter for you. Bring the list of the faculty with whom you have worked (in his department), as well as your CV, etc. Schedule a time to meet with the chairman and tell him about why you have chosen your career and your future goals. The meeting will begin with, "What can I do for you?" Be forthright: "Well sir, I am applying for residency in orthopedics. I wanted to sit down with you and share with you why I have chosen this field and what my career goals are. I would like to get your opinion on what I should do next and any additional advice you have for becoming a great orthopedic physician." At this point, give him your CV and tell him why you want to do orthopedics and what your career goals are. Couching it in this context sends the message that you respect his opinion, you see him as a mentor for your career, and you value his advice. The real agenda, however, is that you get to communicate your commitment

to the decision, share some of your strengths, and gain familiarity with the chairman.

b. No more than one letter can come from someone outside of your field of interest. Be smart about this: there is a tension between different specialties, and you do not want to augment this tension by choosing a letter writer from a specialty that your chosen-specialty might have issues with. Primary care specialties all respect each other: peds, medicine, family practice, and these letters are interchangeable. Surgical specialists will do ok with a letter from medicine or ob/gyn, but a letter from other non-surgical specialties will not help you.

c. If you have done extensive research with someone (i.e., greater than a year, or research that will be definitely be discussed as part of your interview) you need to get a letter from this person. That is, unless you think that it will be a bad letter. It will be a red-flag if you do not.

d. The other letters should come from faculty with whom you have worked. All letter writers should come from academic faculty if possible: community practice physicians will lose some respect because it is always unknown if they see enough students to make a valid decision as to whether any given student has the mettle to make it in the career. Remember too that there is a tension between academics and private practice, and you do not want to run the risk of exacerbating this tension if one of your program directors has an ax to grind with private practice. That said, if the person really knows you, they will be better than an academician that knows you less well. Residents, chief residents, ancillary staff (nurses, etc.) should not be used to write a letter. The implication will be that you were not good enough to find three faculty to endorse you: you had to turn to non-faculty. If they have great things to say about you, ask them to write a letter detailing such things to one of your faculty letter writers. Remember the most important point: **the letter should be a personal endorsement; the more the writer can include personal anecdotes, the better. Choose people who know you.**

B. Dean's letter. The deans letter is the most important of the letters. Your dean should request a time to talk with you about your career goals and attributes. Do not take this meeting lightly. Go in prepared with your CV, your auxiliary personal statement, a list of your letter writers and any other faculty members with whom you have worked that you think could endorse you. You must be supremely confident in your ability to do this career, since the confidence reflected in the dean's letter will be proportional to that exhibited in this meeting. Follow the same advice as for the Department Chairman meeting (including the same dialog).

C. Personal statement. See Step 4

D. CV. See Step 1

### III. ERAS

ERAS is the Electronic Residency Application Service. It is an internet-based program that allows you to input your application materials once, and then designate to which programs you would like it sent. You can send your application to as many programs as you like, and for competitive specialties, you should. There is a cost, however: the first 10 programs cost a flat rate of \$60. Additional programs can be added at a cost of \$8 per program for the next 10, and \$15 per program thereafter. The ERAS process is surprisingly simple. If you have completed your CV and personal statement, it will be nothing more than cutting and pasting portions of your CV to the ERAS form. Log on to [www.aamc.org/students/eras/start.htm](http://www.aamc.org/students/eras/start.htm) and the program will walk your through it. Here are a few tips for each step:

A. Step 1: Research Programs and Contact Them for Information. Choosing a particular program at this point is not important; so much of the decision will be made by the interview to make ranking programs at this point meaningless. The most important thing to do now is assemble the list of programs that interest you; the particular order is unimportant. You do not have to interview at each program that invites you for an interview, so it is to your advantage to apply to more programs now and then pair down the list later. The best source of information is:

1. The program director from your school in the specialty to which you are applying. He will know the current status and reputation of other programs in the specialty.
2. The dean of students will also be helpful, especially with respect to how competitive you will be for each program.
3. Residents and interns in your school's program. The interns have just finished the interview process.
4. Students from last year. If you are a third year student in May-June, ask the exiting fourth-year students their experience on the interview trails.
5. Websites. The best place to get information is the websites of The individual programs' are best, but also check out the specialty organization's website for information on individual program's board pass rate (Chapter Career Specifics). Stay away from the chat rooms: these are often the voice of disgruntled students and interns; surveys are usually with an  $n < 10$ . They are for the most part unreliable.

B. Step 2: Get Your ERAS token from your Dean's Office.

Do this early: the dean's office is processing 100 to 200 student's ERAS applications, so it will take time to scan in your transcript, letters of recommendation, and dean's letter. Once the flood of students hits the dean's office, the process will slow exponentially.

C. Step 3: Register with MyERAS. As soon as you have your Dean's office token, immediately log on to [www.myeras.aamc.org](http://www.myeras.aamc.org) and get your password and AAMC

ID number, even if you do have the data to input into your form. The dean's office will be notified as soon as you log on, and they can begin uploading your transcript, etc. They cannot start this process until they are notified by ERAS, which is dependent upon your registering. Carefully complete all questions, and make sure your token number is typed in correctly. The registration page can only be accessed once; so take extra care in ensuring that this information is accurate. The details on your application can be entered later. Enter the information in standard sentence format (i.e., do not use all capital letters). You can return to your application via [www.myeras.aamc.org](http://www.myeras.aamc.org) and entering your AAMC ID number and password.

D. Step 4: Enter your profile: name and contact information. The most important part of this step is ensuring that you have entered an email address that is accurate and is one that you frequently check. All communication between the residency programs and you (including invitations for interviews) will go through this email address, so make it a good one that will be accessible to you throughout forth year.

E. Step 5: Create your MyERAS application

Click on the "My Application" link. You can only create one ERAS application; all programs will receive the same basic application, but you can customize parts of the application for different programs (see step 6) if for example you are applying for radiology programs and preliminary medicine programs.

1. You do not have to complete all of the information at one time; when you have reached your limit, hit save and log off. You can come back later and fill in additional information as it acquired. You can continue doing this up until the point you send the application to the programs (Step 8).
2. A nifty feature of the ERAS program is the "My checklist" which will alert you to fields on the application that have not been completed. Do not fill in fields if you are unsure of the correct answer or how you want it phrased. Once you put something in the field, it will be taken off your checklist; if it remains blank, the program will be able to alert you to complete it later when you do know the way you want the information phrased.
3. Once you have completed all 14 pages of the application, you will need to certify it and submit it to the ERAS post-office for processing. You cannot send it to programs until you have done this. Before you submit it, print out a hard copy and let someone read it to proof for spelling errors, etc. Make sure the application is exactly as you want it to appear: once you certify it, it is done. You cannot change it. The exceptions to this are the profile information (your contact information), the AOA field (if you get elected in the fall), and your document assignments (that is, which documents on the application you want sent to each program).

F. Step 6: Add documents to your application. In addition to the fields that ask about your awards, research, community service, etc.; the ERAS program will ask you to attach documents such as your personal statement and letters of recommendation. You are responsible only for attaching your personal statement, authorizing transmission of your USLME scores, and identifying the names of the people who will write letters of recommendation for you. The Dean's office will attach these letters, the Dean's letter and your transcript.

1. Personal statement. See chapter 101. Cut and paste your personal statement from a word processor program (Windows, etc) to the ERAS application. This will allow you to do grammar and spelling checks prior to inserting it in ERAS. Make sure you have several people read this before you attach it to ERAS. ERAS will allow you to enter up to 32,000 characters (five pages), but do not do enter more than one page of statement. You can also create more than one personal statement (multiple versions if you like), but you can only send one statement per program. To create a new Personal Statement, click on New Personal Statement. You can edit any personal statement that has not been transmitted, but once you have transmitted it to a program you will have to do a whole new statement to replace the one you sent.

### 2. USMLE Transcripts

To have USMLE transcripts sent to programs, you have to authorize the release of your transcripts. Click on the "USMLE Scores" authorization button to do so. You should also decide if you want automatic submission of subsequent Step 2 scores. Once you authorize this, you cannot take it back. Finally, you need to designate the programs to which you want the scores sent. USMLE Step 1, Step 2 and Step 3 scores are reported as part of a complete USMLE transcript.

### 3. Request Letters of Recommendation (LOR)

Insert the names of people who will be writing letters of recommendation for you. Print the instruction sheet and give it to your letter writers. On it, they will be directed to send their letters to the dean's office, who will then load the letters onto ERAS. You will be given an option to review the letters prior to having them loaded onto ERAS. This is a no-brainer: waive your right to see the letter before it is submitted. If you have selected your letter-writers carefully (as above), there should be little risk that the letter will be damaging. Asking to see the letters looks like you have something to hide.

You can send each letter to specific programs; no more than four letters can be sent to any given program. There can be only one letter per letter writer. You cannot edit nor delete letters that have already been sent to a program. Do not list the Dean's Letter as one of the letters of recommendation, as it will be attached under a separate section.

#### 4. The Photograph

You can and should provide a wallet-sized (2.5x3.5) color photo to your dean's office for transmission to residency programs. The dean's office will scan in the photo and attach it to ERAS. This is very important: take the time and spend the money to find a professional photographer (Glammor Shots, no) to take a picture of you. The most important part of the admission decision is the interview: the wallet photo will link the memory of you on your interview to your application file that sits in front of the admission's committee. It must be a good photo.

#### 5. Medical School Transcript and Dean's Letters

The dean's office will attach your medical school transcript and your Dean's Letter to your ERAS file.

### G. Step 7: Select Programs

1. Use the people listed in step 1 to decide to which programs you should apply.
2. How many programs should you apply to? In 2005, the average rank list of the 96% of applicants who matched was 8; the length of the 4.4% who did not was 4.62. You need to plan accordingly: applicants to all specialties should have at least eight programs on their list, which means you need at least eight interviews. Not all of the programs to which you will apply will offer an interview, your application list should be 20% greater than your required interview list. Everyone should have eight on their interview list; the following people should expand the required interview list as follows:
  - a. Add 1 program to the length if your school's reputation is not good.
  - b. Add 2 programs if you are not competitive on paper (see chapter 99).
  - c. Add programs for the following subspecialties:
    - i. Ortho- Twenty programs
    - ii. Ophthalmology- Fifteen programs
    - iii. ENT- Fifteen programs
    - iv. Neurosurgery- Twenty programs
    - v. Dermatology- Fifteen programs

Remember that just because you are offered an interview, you do not have to accept. It is better to have the option to refuse instead of wishing you had applied to more programs. You also have the option of canceling interviews later in the process. Give yourself the option to do both by applying to enough programs from the beginning.

3. To select programs, click on the link for My Programs. Programs are split up into Selected and Applied categories.
  - a. Selected programs are those that you have chosen to assign documents. This list can be changed.

b. Applied programs are those to whom you have already sent the applicants. These cannot be removed, but you can change the documents assigned to each, however.

#### H. Step 8: Assign Documents to Your Selected Programs

All programs to which you apply will be sent the same common application forms (CAF): the dean's letter, transcript and photo. You must also assign your personal statement(s), letters of recommendation, and USMLE transcript to the programs. For most applicants, these too can be sent to all programs as a standard packet. You do have the option, however, of designating different letters of recommendation, etc to specific programs if you wish. This is usually not worth the effort to tailor a different application to different programs. The exception is for those applying to a core specialty (i.e., neurology) and a preliminary program.

#### I. Step 9: Send your Application to Programs

Once you have completed the payment process, print out a copy of the Final Invoice. This will be tax-deductable next year (see chapter 103).

#### J. Following the progress of your application

You can follow the status of your ERAS application using the Applicant Document Tracking System (ADTS) on the ERAS web site. This lists each program to which you have applied, the date the materials were uploaded by the dean's office, and the date the programs to which you applied downloaded the application. Programs will have access to your ERAS application as soon as it is posted, but Dean's letters are not released until November 1st. You will need your AAMC ID number and password to access this section. It is very important that you follow the progress of your application until all of your letters of recommendation are posted on the application. If by October all of the letters are not completed, return to the letter writer to ask to have it sent to the Dean's office.

### **III. Timeline**

#### January-March Third Year

Begin asking for letters of recommendation. Continue this process as the year progresses and as you work with other faculty members (i.e., during your sub-internship), but start thinking about letters right now. Remember that most academic faculty take vacation during the summer months (when the academic load is light), and it may be hard to contact them during the summer. It will also be harder to get them to complete the letter during the summer.

#### April

Begin working on your personal statement, especially if you have decided on your career. Even if you have not, now is the time to starting putting pen to paper to elucidate what matters to you and what you are looking for in a career. Who knows? This just might solve your career crisis.

### May-June

Go to your Dean's Office and obtain an ERAS Token. You cannot log on to MyERAS (your personal page) without it. Immediately log on to ERAS and register with ERAS. (see above). You do not have to up-load all of the data now, but make the site available for the Dean's office.

### July

Finish your personal statement; have someone read it for you. Write your CV and have someone read it.

### August

Begin up-loading the CV data on the ERAS site. Finalize your letter of recommendation list in the Dean's office.

### September

Finish completing the ERAS form. Select the programs to which you want to apply.

### September-October

You will begin to receive interviews from programs. Some programs will not extend interviews until the Dean's letter has been released (November 1<sup>st</sup>) so do not panic early in October.

### November- January

Begin interviewing.

For early match specialties, back this schedule up by two months.