

Step 9: The Match

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

With all steps completed, now it's time for step 9.... Ranking your programs.

This chapter is divided into two sections:

1. Assessing your degree of competitiveness in the match process.
2. Providing a strategy from getting the most from the match.

Do not get these confused, however. The single most important lesson when it comes to the match is that you make your match list decisions based upon where you want to train, not based upon where you think you are competitive enough to go. Regardless of how competitive you are on paper, rank your programs based upon where you want to go. It is smart to consider your degree of competitiveness when you are making decisions about how many programs to which apply and how many of these you should interview. Once you have completed the interviews, however, you should rank every program that you would not mind training at, and you should rank this list based upon what programs you would most like to attend. When it comes to making the rank list, your degree of competitiveness should not play a role at all.

I. Assessing your degree of competitiveness

First step: How competitive is the specialty to which you are applying? The advice in this chapter depends upon the specialty to which you apply. There are exceptions to the general rules below; certainly there is a tier of programs at the top of less competitive specialties such as internal medicine that is every bit as competitive as a highly competitive specialty such as dermatology or orthopedics. For the most part however, you should first assess how competitive your application process will be. The following specialties are highly competitive: dermatology, neurosurgery, orthopedics, urology, radiology.

II. Second step: How competitive are you?

There are many facets that go into define a quality residency applicant, though some are more important than others. The best way to look at the application process is analagous to Olympic skating's short and long program.

A. The Short Program. This is composed of screening parameters to decide who gets to advance to the next round (the Interview: the Long Program). These screening parameters are very important to competitive specialties and programs. These programs have many more applicants than interview positions, and while these numerical scores may seem harsh, there has to be an objective quick way to screen the applicants.

1. **Board scores** are the favorite, since it is an easy, objective standardized parameter that all applicants share. Reading the letters of recommendation would be better, but it is too time consuming as a screening test. Looking at the grades would also be better, but grades are different at different schools, and it is difficult and time consuming to try to compare the grades from many applicants from different schools.
2. **Pedigree.** Programs tend to trust past experience. If people from your school have done well in their program, your chance for an interview are improved. Ask your dean of students where past students have applied to assess your chance of obtaining an interview. Keep in mind that your undergraduate school may also be factored into the pedigree. As with all of the long program, there is nothing you can do about this, so relax and move forward with what you do have.
3. **Fail Scan.** Grades are not a part of the screening process at most programs because it takes time to compare transcripts from different schools. A quick scan by the office secretary for "Fails" or "Repeats" on the transcript however may be used as screening.

B. The Long Program. If you clear the short program, you will be invited to an interview and the subsequent long program. Some of the items in the short program show themselves again in the long program. The items here are listed in order of importance.

1. The result of your **interview** is the single most important part of the application process. Remember that people make decisions about people, and then attempt to find more objective criteria (grades, scores, recommendations) to justify why they believe what they do. See Step 6 for how to succeed in the interview. For all of things below, a good interview will compensate for deficiencies in virtually all of items below. Points= 0 to 50.
2. **Letters of recommendation.** Next to the interview, the letter of recommendation is the most important part of the application. See Step 5 for what defines a great letter of recommendation, but remember that the more personal the letter the better. Great letters and a great interview will get you the spot. Points= 0 to 30.
3. **Quality of your school.** If you are curious, you can ask your Dean of Students how your school rates. Assessing the quality of a school is not as easy as looking at US News and World Report ratings; the quality of a school will be influenced by the program's past experience with your school. If your predecessors were quality; the stock of your school rises for that program. This is where your Dean of Students can help you in assessing how previous applicants have done at the programs to which you are applying. The highest ranked schools have a premium of 30 points; the next tier of nationally known schools, 20 points; other American-based schools 10 points. One method of discerning the current quality of your school is to see to what rank last year's class went on their match list. Ninety percent of highest ranked schools match within their top two choices on their match list; the average match length for top-ranked schools is four.

4. **Grades.** Grades are interpretable only in the context of your school. Some schools have grade inflation; others grade more honestly. AOA helps if you have it, but it does not end your chances if you do not receive it. All A's (honors) will get you 30 points; predominately B+'s (high pass) 20 points; predominately B's (pass) 10 points.
5. **Research.** Programs do not care what you have published, they care what you will publish for them. Their primary interest is that you have learned some basic research skills so that they do not have to teach you how to do those skills. Potential then, is what they are looking for, and publications are the best marker of this potential (i.e., you have succeeded at it). But still, engaging in a research project, even if it has not yet been published, is almost as valuable as having been published. Don't be too hard on yourself on this one: your job for the past three years was to be a student. Anyone who truly understands research knows that meaningful research is not a product of a hobby, but rather as a function of protected time. Unless you have had the luxury of taking a year off to do research, it is unlikely that you will have done meaningful research. Once again, it is the potential to do research, and not the length of the CV that will be meaningful to program directors. If you have published research, give yourself 20 points; 10 points for having engaged in research.
6. **Community service.** The important feature of this part of the application is that the space is not blank. No one wants someone who has been so selfish as to focus only on their career development and not dedicate some time to university and community service. There are bonus points (15 points) for leading a community service project; marginal points for having been a part of something (5 points).
7. A very rough estimate of how competitive you might be:
 - a. Highly competitive 175 to 130
 - b. Competitive 129 to 100
 - c. Average 99 to 80
 - d. Less competitive <80

III. How the match works:

A. Residents will rank their programs from most preferable to least preferable. Programs will do the same. Each program has a designated number of positions (x) and the computer will try to fill this roster until it is full or the match is complete (all applicants have been matched somewhere). The computer, once it has received both lists, will try to match the two.

B. The match is gained to the applicant, meaning it is the applicant's list that is given priority over the programs' lists in running the program. Here is how it works:
 The computer will try to match your #1 program to that program until that program fills. Meanwhile, your #2 program will be filling up. But you haven't lost anything with program #2; it is filling only with people who have chosen it #1 and the program has listed as in their first tier. But only the applicants who are higher on the program's list will have secured a spot. What does this mean? It means that if you try for your #1 program but you do not get it (it fills with other applicants it wants), you will then go to your second choice program. Since your #1 choice is full, the computer now considers your #2 choice as your #1 choice. It will try to match you to your #2 program as if it was your #1 choice. This means that if you are higher on the program's list than applicant B (even if applicant B had it as his #1 choice from the beginning), you will have priority for that program. The long and the short of this is that **you should rank your favorite programs first; your second favorite program second and so on. You lose nothing by doing this, and you have everything to gain.** You will not lose a spot on your second choice because you went after your first choice.

IV. Rules for succeeding at the match.

A. Rank your favorite programs first.

B. Rank only programs that you would not mind attending. Do not rank a program that you hate; it is better to scramble for something you do like than to be locked in for a program that you hate, because once you are locked in, you are locked in.

C. Make sure your match list is long enough. In 2002, the average match list length of people who successfully matched (96% of applicants) was 7.96; the list length of people who did not successfully match (4.4%) was 4.62. The following rules will help you with your rank list length:

- a. Non-competitive specialties (family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics, ob/gyn, psychiatry) should have a match list of 8 to 10.
- b. Competitive specialties (orthopedics, neurosurgery, urology, radiology, dermatology, ENT) should be twice as long.
- c. You can reduce your list by:
 - i. 20% if you are a highly competitive applicant (see above)
 - ii. 10% if you are a competitive applicant

d. If you are couples matching:

- i. Use the guideline for the most competitive specialty of the two applicants.
- ii. Use the guideline of the least competitive applicant of the two applicants.

D. Do not believe program directors when they tell you that you definitely have a position. The match is funny, and sometimes program's get very lucky such that they go down their list only a few spots. What is a guaranteed match position on the list for most years may leave you unmatched in a year when the program does very well.

E. For more information on the match, see www.nrmp.org/res_match/algorithms.html