

AUPO/AAO Webinar
2021 Advice for the Ophthalmology Residency Match
July 7, 2021

Answers to Questions

Application Questions

Q: Does the completed application sent to programs need to include the school's MSPE?

A: No. MSPEs are released to programs on Sept. 29. MSPEs are not required in order to have a complete application.

Q: Can a program have an application deadline before 9/1?

A: No.

Q: Will programs be able to access applications before Sept 1st?

A: They will only be able to access applications Sept 1 or after.

Q: Is there any benefit to having a complete application before 9/1? Are they transmitted in the order they were completed?

A: There is no advantage to having everything completed early.

Q: What type of processing time should we expect after submission? i.e. when should we submit our application in order to have our application ready for programs to view on September 1st?

A: Applications components are uploaded in real time, and Programs are notified as soon as the application is complete.

Q: Should all Letters of Recommendation (LORs) be submitted by Sept 1?

A: Programs will receive your application on Sept 1 or after. LOR may be submitted after Sept 1.

Q: What is the opinion of 3 ophtho letters of recommendations vs. 2 ophtho letters and 1 non-ophtho letter?

A: All else equal, get at least 1 non-ophtho. You may have unique circumstances that make 3 ophtho better but recognize that most programs prefer 1-2 letters from ophthalmologists.

Q: How important is research as part of one's application? Especially for someone who does not want to go into academic ophthalmology.

A: In general, you want to have some experience in all the areas of the application. Some will see 'no research' and put you on the no interview pile, others may not feel the same way.

Q: Can you upload unofficial transcripts from your college to the SF match portal, or do I need to contact my college to have them send official documents to the SF match. If the latter, how do we coordinate this?

A: Student copy transcripts are acceptable.

Q: When is the deadline for having our medical school transcripts uploaded?

A: Should be uploaded before Sept 1.

Q: If "dual-credit" courses were taken in high school at a local community college and you receive college credit, will that transcript be needed?

A: Whatever is listed in your primary college transcript.

Q: If my official primary college transcript already lists the two summer school courses I took at a community college, do I still need to submit a transcript from the community college?

A: No. It is fine to only submit the primary college transcript as it lists those classes.

Q: Are there recommended word limits in the SF match application for the "career objectives" and "specialty electives and related activities" sections?

A: Generally, it should be a short paragraph, 2-5 sentences.

Q: Is double application viewed negatively/seen as though you do not have "complete" interest in ophtho?

A: There is a risk of this perception, particularly at your home institution. Your own advisor will be able to discuss the nuances of dual application in the context of your own person application characteristics.

Q: Are all applications considered equally before the interview invitations are sent, regardless of time submitted? Or is it more first-come, first-served?

A: The applications open to the programs on the same day which eliminates the need/perceived benefit to get it in early.

Q: If you have strong geographical/academic ties to a program, is that weighed into your application? How would you express this?

A: You can create personalized autobiographical sketches to send to particular programs which highlight your specific interests/ties to the program, area, etc.

Q: How long in advance do we have to request medical school transcripts?

A: This is med school specific.

Q: My school still suggests applying by mid-August - is there a reason for that if programs receive applications Sept 1st? processing delays, etc?

A: Completed applications will be released on September 1.

Q: Is there any problem that I put my research in other fields in my CV, besides just my research in ophthalmology?

A: No. You should list all research.

Q: Is there a benefit to submitting on September 1st versus any time before interviews are extended on October 18?

A: Applications may be accepted Sept 1st or after, though Sept 1st is usually a good target date. Review the program directory in your SF Match account and find information about program specific deadlines.

Q: The ENTIRE career objectives and specialty electives/activities sections should be a short paragraph of 2-5 sentences, or each activity can have a description of 2-5 sentences?

A: Career objectives and specialty electives/activities should be listed separately. You can use paragraphs or bullet points to describe.

Q: What information, aside from away electives, can we list under "specialty electives and related activities"?

A: Things relevant to ophthalmology experience or related ophtho work. These include outreach activities, interest group events, and research among others.

Q: How does ranking work with double applying in programs that are not early matches, e.g., neuro? Say 2 body problem restricts me heavily to a specific institution; can I rank ophtho at that institution as 1, neuro there as 2, and then other ophtho programs at other institutions for 3+?

A: Unfortunately, not. The Ophtho match is through SF Match and the Neuro match is through NRMP. The match for each happens at different times. For your specific example: you would have to rank ophtho programs. If you don't match in ophtho through SF Match, then you can proceed to rank the neuro programs in NRMP (this match happens later).

Q: Would it be reasonable to attempt to request that our school send out our MSPE before Sept 1 if we would like for it to be part of our app? Are the clerkship comments viewed as valuable?

A: MSPE is released uniformly on Sept 29. There is no need to request an early release.

Q: Any benefit in submitting mid-August to account for transcript processing time?

A: You can upload your materials as you have them. Completed applications will be released on September 1.

Q: Is the career objectives section supposed to be treated as another mini essay like the 2/4 prompts we have to answer? How long should it be?

A: Historically, career objectives are usually 2-3 sentences.

Q: If career objectives are 2-3 sentences and specialty activities/community service section is also 2-3 sentences, where do we get to include our CV content?

A: The career objectives may be a short paragraph. You may elaborate more in your related activities.

Q: For poster presentations, if your project was presented and won an award, do you still list the presentation and award on SFMatch?

A: You may.

Q: Is there any difference in chance of getting an interview if you submit an application in July vs. late August?

A: No. Applications open to programs on the same date.

Q: NA is not accepted by the application for GPA. Only a numerical response is allowed to move on.

A: If no GPA, leave it blank.

Q: Do programs publicize if they have hard cut offs for things like step 1 which they publish to help students who might be less competitive know how to focus their efforts?

A: Not usually. Most programs make a concerted effort to review applications holistically.

Q: Should hobbies/activities have a ~1 sentence description or just a word?

A: Your choice. You can include a short description for important hobbies.

Away Rotation Questions

Q: To be clear, are AAO and AUPO in agreement with the AAMC recommendations that students who do not have a home program are allowed to pursue two away rotations?

A: Yes. That being said, some reviewers do not like to see applicants devoting too much of their limited elective time to ophthalmology. However, students will not be penalized for performing more than 1 away rotation.

Q: Do scholarship rotations for underrepresented minority students count towards the 'one away elective' applied via VSAS rotations?

A: Recommend you clarify with your medical school and where you did your VSAS rotation. Discuss with your advisor as well, since all these stakeholders will know the scope of your application.

Q: Will an applicant be looked at negatively if he/she is unable to perform an away elective?

A: Not at all. Away electives are completely optional, and depending on a wide variety of factors, may or may not have any effect (positive or negative) upon your application.

Q: Do I have to indicate in my application where I did my away elective? Will that increase bias against me?

A: Your choice, but it may show in your transcript. It is unlikely that programs will have either a positive or negative bias toward any away rotation.

Q: What makes a student stand out while doing rotations/away rotations?

A: Carry a notebook, take notes in this notebook, not your phone. Otherwise, it looks like you're on your phone. Be engaged in your learning, be helpful, be collegial to all staff, residents, and attendings. Be comfortable with the eye exam. Read up on the patients that you see.

Q: If we received multiple away rotation offers, does declining one of them result in the program not inviting us to interview in the residency application cycle?

A: You cannot accept more than one rotation for a time block. The programs understand that. However, your decision to accept a different away rotation does indicate your preference. This may or may not impact the decision to receive an interview.

Q: For students who cannot always do away rotations due to scheduling/financial/other reasons, how can they show interest in a different region of the country to overcome whatever "regional bias" may exist?

A: Research programs prior, try to attend any open houses that programs may hold in the summer/fall, be proactive during your interview describing specifically why you like a program.

Q: Any thoughts or perspectives on trying to apply for enough aways to get a position versus not burning bridges if you get more than one acceptance?

A: The burning bridges could happen, however doubt it will come into significant play. In general, the less competitive your away application, the more programs you may need to apply to in order to receive a slot.

Q: Can we do an away elective during the winters or is it only possible to do them before applications?

A: You can do them whenever they are available - this will be specific to each program. You do not need to complete Aways prior to your application.

Q: If I am serious about staying at my home institution, should I avoid doing an away?

A: Most likely not; Aways are great learning opportunities, and you also do not know that you will match at your home institution.

Q: Do we list away elective rotations under "specialty electives and related activities"?

A: Yes

Q: Should we list only rotations that we have completed or also those that we have scheduled for the upcoming year?

A: OK to list as pending.

Q: If we reach out to a mentor who offers us a rotation, which is obviously not a VSAS elective, is this looked upon negatively (given applicants are only allowed 1 away elective)?

A: Check with your school.

Q: If my school told students that we are allowed both an out of state away rotation and an in-state/local away rotation at a local school not technically affiliated with our medical school, would it be fine to complete both aways? Technically this would mean being able to complete and schedule 2 aways at the discretion of our school, but the national guidelines allow one.

A: Check with your school.

Q: As medical students we don't all get much hands-on experience with ophthalmology physical exam skills. How do you suggest preparing for away electives in this regard?

A: Check with your school advisor and Dean of Student Affairs. Sometimes there are alumni association members who may allow you to shadow, as well as other opportunities. The American Academy of Ophthalmology has an excellent medical student website with interactive cases; these tutorials can give you an idea of how to approach the physical eye exam.

Q: How do we find out about virtual opportunities at other programs, like Dr. Alabiad mentioned?

A: VSLO has a list of virtual ophthalmology rotations that one can participate in for credit. The others that are not for credit are not necessarily posted in a centralized location. You can also check the medical student section on the AUPO website.

Dual-Application Questions

Q: How do I decide if I should dual-apply and how do I begin the process?

A: The decision to dual apply is an individual decision, and it will be specific for each candidate. It is important to seek advice from both Ophthalmology Mentors AND your medical school non-ophthalmology advisors. Your Vice Dean of Student Affairs and medical school advisors likely have experience in students' dual applying for ophthalmology and other fields. They are also a great resource and starting point. If you do decide to dual apply, you should have advisors in both fields, as the application process is likely different for each field.

Q: Is dual applying looked at unfavorably by admissions committees?

A: Most ophtho admissions committees will probably not know that you are double applying (with the exception of possibly your home program) unless you tell them.

Q: Regarding dual applying, I have been told that if ophtho programs find out you are dual applying because you are concerned about your competitiveness, they will not consider you "committed" to the specialty. Any thoughts on this?

A: It is certainly a risk one takes. There are likely to be differing opinions on this. Discuss with your advising dean on your approach to this.

Q: If we are dual applying, should we only accept one specialty's interview invite from a single institution?

A: This should not preclude you from attending both interviews at a single institution.

Q: If an applicant were to dual apply (ex. Ophthalmology and Medicine) into an integrated Ophthalmology program with mostly a Medicine Intern year, would the two departments at the same institution know we are applying to both fields?

A: Likely yes.

ERAS Questions

Q: Do we need to apply in ERAS and rank in NRMP for joint programs? Or do we just need NRMP?

A: Although this may vary, you will typically need an ERAS application. Check with each program to be sure

Q: If we apply to ERAS for a TY year for a traditional program, do we need to have our letter writers write new letters for a TY year and not ophtho focused letters? Similar question for the personal statement, does the personal statement need to be more generic or can it be the same statement for ophtho?

A: LORs and personal statements will likely be nearly the same except for maybe 1-2 sentences.

Q: ERAS does not have any option to apply to internal medicine intern year for ophthalmology, but they do have this for other specialties. For traditional and joint programs, should we apply to transition years only on ERAS? Or is there another way to apply for the intern year when not integrated?

A: Yes. You can apply to transitional year and prelim medicine programs on ERAS.

Q: How should we apply for the PGY-1 year regarding joint, integrated, and traditional programs? Do I need to do separate PGY-1 interviews? Will I need a separate non-ophthalmology focused letter of recommendation?

A: In a “traditional” program, the PGY-1 year and Ophthalmology residency are separate and may occur at different institutions. A Joint Program is administered at the same/affiliated institution by another department – it is NRMP & SF Match required. An Integrated program is administered by the Ophthalmology department - SF Match only required. The type of PGY1 is listed on the SF Match website for each program. In general, it is important and recommended to participate in **both** NRMP & SF Match to include various PGY-1 formats/programs. Interview processes for the PGY-1 year will be program specific. The type of PGY-1 year for each program is on the SF Match website. It is not guaranteed that a PGY-1 interview spot will be reserved, you need to check with the individual program. Letters of recommendation for the PGY-1 year are typically similar to your Ophthalmology letter of recommendation, except for maybe 1-2 sentences.

IMG Questions

Q: Will the OET required for this year be eligible for next year’s match?

A: The Occupational English Test is not required for the SFMatch

Q: Are mentorship programs available for IMGs?

A: This varies. Check with previous graduates of your school or your school admin. Your medical school alumni association is a good resource to consider, for alumni who may have matched into US Ophthalmology residency programs.

Q: How critical is it for IMGs to have their ECFMG certificates submitted before Sept 1st? (mine will probably be out a week or so after).

A: Submit as soon as you can.

Q: How can IMGs improve their chances of receiving interviews?

A: This varies. Check with previous graduates of your school or your school administration.

Q: Is there any specific advice for osteopathic or international students applying ophthalmology since they have historically matched lower than their allopathic US counterparts?

A: Check with your school and local advisors

Q: How does it look for IMGs realistically regarding matching in an ophthalmology program?

A: In aggregate, IMGs have a lower chance of matching; however, stats capture overall and general numbers and may or may not apply to your unique situation.

Interview Questions

Q: Is it recommendable to wait to get interviews from ophthalmology programs to apply on ERAS for PGY-1 (if joint/traditional program)?

A: In general, it is better to apply as close to the recommended timelines for both ERAS and SF Match. Recommend discuss with your medical school advisor as well.

Q: Will the number of interview spots sent out equal the number of interview invites sent out?

A: Yes - programs may offer only the same number of interviews as their number of slots.

Q: I noticed some programs do not have interview dates listed on the Excel spreadsheet that outlines all participating ophthalmology residency programs. Is there a date when all programs will have their interview dates listed on that document or online?

A: Most programs will have dates listed by September, but some will be later if their interviews are later in the season.

Q: What are your views on contacting programs directly to show interest? Is there a good time for this? (Before vs after interviews)

A: Check with your local advisor.

Q: Do most of your schools provide mock zoom interviews for your M4s?

A: Seems like most do but can't comment with certainty.

Q: What stops the same elite 50 applicants from taking all the interview spots?

A: An applicant is limited to accepting no more than 18 interviews.

Q: Is the acceptance of an interview binding? What if another invite that comes later falls on the same day?

A: You are free to cancel any interviews and accept another at your discretion. It is polite and professional to let programs know as soon as possible so that they may replace you with another deserving applicant. If a spot is available on another day, you may also switch at your discretion.

Q: Are there any hidden gems when it comes to advice for interviews? In other words, if two applicants have very similar stats, are there certain qualities (other than looks) that one can show during virtual interviews that you look for and help you choose one applicant over the other?

A: There are as many answers to this question as there are interviewers as everyone will have bias. Strongest recommendation is to be yourself and let your personality come through so the program knows how you will fit with them. If you are funny, be funny...the programs that value this will like it, the programs that don't may not be a good culture for you anyway.

Q: Is there a last date that interview invites can be sent?

A: No, but interviews will be completed in early January.

Q: Are most programs' interviews scheduled as half-days, or are there many full-day interviews?

A: Most are half. The website will indicate times of the interviews

Q: Just want to clarify - Are we allowed to accept 18 interviews or attend 18 interviews? If we accept 18 but then decide to drop one and accept a new invite, would that be ok?

A: Yes. A total of 18 max at any given time.

Q: Can programs only extend as many interview invites as they can accommodate? i.e., is it a first-come first-serve situation?

A: Programs cannot over-invite to fill their interview spots.

Q: Do interviews typically happen during the weeks of Christmas and New Year's?

A: No.

Q: Interview invites begin to send out in October, what is the latest day a program can send out interviews?

A: Usually Dec or even early Jan.

Q: What should we do if there is a situation in which we are unavailable on the specific interview dates? (say two programs overlap on a single day). Do we have to pick between the two, or is there a way to reach out to the programs to figure out a secondary date?

A: Most programs have multiple interview dates so you may be able to select alternative dates. Applicants may attend two interview sessions on the same day provided they are half-day sessions and do not conflict (e.g., AM and PM). The central scheduler will not allow you to hold two interviews on the same day if they conflict.

Q: Do social events and other ancillary interview events appear in SF match? Is it possible that one of these events could conflict with another scheduled interview?

A: The departmental/program “additional” events surrounding the actual interview do not get populated in the central interview scheduler on SF Match. There is a possibility that one of these extra events might conflict with an actual interview, but it is not likely as most programs will hold interviews during regular work hours and their mixers/receptions etc. at times outside the normal workday. You can always explain to a program that you could not attend the extra event due to an interview conflict if necessary and it shouldn’t reflect negatively.

Q: I had a friend from last year who got asked more than once to name the programs she interviewed at. If faced with such a question this year, how should I answer or even better, how can I evade this question?

A: That should be reported to SFMatch.

Q: Will programs be required to invite all interviewees to their open house? or will it be selective?

A: The decision to hold open houses is made on a program-by-program basis. Only people who interviewed at the program will be invited.

Q: Will interviews be virtual for the foreseeable future?

A: Commitment to virtual interviews is for this year only and will be reevaluated for future years.

Q: When interviewing, what backgrounds do you like? Is it good to have a blank screen or would that be too bland and non-telling of the student?

A: Depends. Check with your school to see what they recommend for you.

Q: Are the number of interview spots a multiple of the number of residency positions?

A: Varies by programs.

Q: How to find out about culture in virtual interviews?

A: Tough question and tough task. Ask them to describe the type of residents that have been successful in their programs. Attend open houses if possible

Letters of Recommendation Questions

Q: If we request 4 letters of recommendation through SF Match, can we decide which 3 to ultimately submit, or should we only send 3 letter requests through SF Match?

A: Yes. You can request as many letters as desired and assign 3 letters to each program you apply to.

Q: For MD PhD students, opinion on 1 ophtho letter, 1 general letter, and 1 PhD mentor letter vs 2 ophtho letters + 1 PhD mentor letter? Secondly, how are joint letters with multiple writers perceived by programs?

A: Joint letters are generally well accepted. We also understand MD/PhD must have a letter from their PhD mentor. Beyond the 1 vs 2 ophtho do not overstress this point, just get the best possible letter. Go with the strongest and most personal letter.

Q: Is there an advantage to having two ophtho letters vs the one required out of the total 3?

A: No one best way here. Get your best and most personal letters; if all else equal go 2 ophtho, 1 non.

Q: While typically 2 ophtho LORs are preferred, would this still be the case if a student took a research year to include their research mentor as a LOR?

A: That would be a good idea since you spent a year out. But you should include clinical letters.

Q: Does it reflect negatively on an applicant if we have 2 community ophthalmologist letters from ophthalmologists we worked with regularly versus an ophthalmology faculty member at our medical school? Do most programs require a Chair or PD letter?

A: In general no. The best letters are written by those who can vouch for your character, knowledge, and skills. We want to know you best we can.

Q: Do most programs require a chair or PD letter?

A: No. Letters really should be personal. It does not need to be for a Chair or PD.

Q: I've been asked for a letter # from my letter writer; is this something that is part of the SF application?

A: It sounds like your letter writer is asking for your SF Match ID.

Q: Can one letter be from an ophthalmologist who we worked for prior to med school (during a gap year), or is it preferable to have letters from those we made connections with during med school?

A: The best letters are from those people who know you well and can say a lot about your outstanding qualities.

Q: For the recommended non-ophthalmologist letter, is it recommended that this be a clinical letter, a letter from a research mentor in another field, or either?

A: All of those writers would be appropriate. Pick someone who knows you well and can be strongly supportive of you as a candidate by sharing the qualities that you have that will make you a great resident.

Q: Is it acceptable to ask non-physician mentors or supervisors from a prior career to write letters of rec? If acceptable, will it be well-received, or would 3 physicians be preferred?

A: Ask your mentors, this is best evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Q: While 3 is typically the cap for LORs, will some programs allow a 4th or 5th in a supplemental capacity?

A: Not all programs will review letters past the core 3. If it adds to your application, okay to send one. Be prepared that it may not be read.

Q: If I would like to submit 4th or 5th LORs, how can I submit it as a supplemental document?

A: Caution submitting more than 3, if you don't have a good reason this can be a big turn off for programs as you are asking them to take even more time for your application than they already have. If it isn't a unique and rare circumstance you may end up on a no pile out of lack of consideration for the programs and their time.

Q: Can I use a letter that was written 2 years ago during an away ophthalmology elective still considered relevant?

A: It would be better to ask the writer to update the letter, even if it is minimal, and therefore change the date to a more current one.

Q: Continuing on the previous question, would a list or bullet point layout be an okay alternative? (specialty electives section)

A: Readability is important. Bullet points are fine.

Q: I did a research year and worked closely with two mentors who would both write strong letters. Neither has seen much of my clinical skills, but I have also spent a significant amount of time clinically with another ophthalmologist. Therefore, I'm considering asking 3 ophthalmologists for letters especially since I haven't worked in a non-ophthalmology setting in over a year. Is this a bad idea?

A: 3 ophthalmology letters is appropriate for some situations. There's no rule that you HAVE to have a non-ophthalmology letter. However, non-ophthalmology letters demonstrate that a strong performance is not unique to the specialty you are interested in

Q: On the SF match website under the LOR section, it gives the option to either keep the letter confidential or select that you desire access to the letter. Is there a competitive advantage to waiving the right to see the letter and/or is it frowned upon to see the letter beforehand?

A: This may differ from reviewer to reviewer...however, a reviewer may feel that the letter where the applicant has not waived their right to read the letter would be filtered and possibly not as authentic/unbiased as a letter written in confidence.

Q: Is there a disadvantage if one only has one letter from an ophthalmologist?

A: Get your best and most personal letters. Some may wonder why only 1 ophtho., but you can't be everything to everyone. The only requirement is one ophthalmology letter. There is no perfect ratio.

Q: For joint program application, will they take our ophtho LOR or do we need extra medicine or FM letters?

A: For ERAS, you will likely need at least one IM or FM letter.

Q: Should we waive our rights to read the LORs? I was under the impression that we weren't able to read our letters, but the SF match website indicates that we have the decision to do so.

A: It is highly recommended to waive your right to read the letter. It will allow the letter writer to write honestly and authentically.

Q: Is there any disadvantage to having all three letters from ophthalmologists?

A: That is acceptable though most programs would like a clinical letter from a non-ophthalmology specialty.

Q: How highly is it recommended to have 1 letter writer from an IM sub-I experience? And if it's highly recommended, is it ok if that person only was with you for 1wk?

A: Pick the three people who know you the best.

Q: Are applications incomplete if only 2/3 letters are assigned?

A: Yes. A complete application requires assigning three letters of recommendation to each program you apply to.

Q: Thoughts about having a letter writer from a significant ophtho experience prior to medical school (ex: an undergraduate research experience?) if it is a significant part of your story, and how would you weigh this against having a letter from an IM-subI experience where that individual might have only known you for a very short period of a few days, but it was more clinical in nature?

A: Check with your local advisor. Normally you would have someone who can speak to your clinical abilities.

Mentor Questions

Q: How to find more about specific learning environments of programs?

A: Ask around! Your mentors are so helpful with this. Review program websites. Attend virtual pre-interview informational sessions.

Q: Any recommendations for a second year DO student to be a more competitive applicant considering I do not have a home program?

A: Be proactive to find any opportunity to learn and train in ophtho. We see the challenges you have and understand the grind, your work and dedication will be recognized. Get good grades, become involved in research.

Q: How to be taken seriously by programs in a different region (i.e., south, east coast, west coast) if everything on your transcript from college to med school is in 1 region (i.e., Midwest?)

A: Research the programs prior, try to attend any open houses held in the summer/fall, and be pro-active during your interviews, for example, why do you like this particular program?

Q: If we have no ophthalmology home program, how can we get connected with mentors who might offer us advice? Even if we have a home program, how can we further explore careers in Ophthalmology?

A: Your Vice Dean of Student Affairs is a great person to start with, for both students with and without home programs. Check with your school for recommendations for local ophthalmology advising, including your home Ophthalmology department. If you do not have a home program, often there is a robust alumni association that may have ophthalmologists who can provide mentorship and shadowing opportunities. The American Academy of Ophthalmology, Association of University Professors in Ophthalmology, and SF Match websites all have excellent materials ranging from what it is like to be an ophthalmologist, to applying for Ophthalmology residencies. There are also self-study materials and curated articles for your review. The AAO-AUPO Minority Ophthalmology Mentoring Program is another resource to consider. You can also reach out to current residents and fellows in Ophthalmology.

Q: Now that we're "returning to normal" how would you recommend that students in M1-3 find opportunities to explore Ophthalmology? What would be the best places to find mentors in the field? Are the current M3 class (who completed their first year of medical school virtually) behind on this exploration?

A: Utilize your home dean's office and ophthalmology department. There will be a lot of variability in where people are in their exploration of specialties. However, there are far more virtual resources now as well to get to know ophthalmology.

Q: How do we reach out for mentors?

A: Your vice dean of student affairs is a great resource to start with, they can help guide you on local and national options.

Open House Questions

Q: How do we find out when open houses that programs host are? Is there a centralized area or document that lists this?

A: The open houses after interview season will be organized via SF Match.

Q: What is the best way to find out when virtual open houses are?

A: Check the program website for information. In addition, these will be listed on the SFM site, and will be scheduled through this site as well.

Q: What is a good way to get to know the culture of different programs? Is there a resource available for this?

A: If a program offers a summer/fall open house, this is a great way. Also reach out to alumni from your med school, residents/fellows, and your mentors.

Q: Since scheduling travel/time out for an open house is a serious investment, is it permissible to ask programs how highly they ranked us before we commit to attending their open house?

A: You should go to programs that you are interested in. Programs are not permitted to discuss their rank lists with applicants at any time.

Q: Will a program host multiple open houses in January or will there only be one opportunity to visit?

A: Open houses are still being decided and will be listed on the SFM website. You can check with the program's website.

Personal Statement Questions

Q: When will the essays and autobiographical sketch become available in SFmatch?

A: This is available in your SF Match account. Go to the Documents page (left side menu) > Personal Statement.

Q: Can you describe the intentions of an autobiographical sketch and how it's different from a traditional personal statement?

A: It is similar to the personal statement, but the focus is clearly placed on you as the applicant and the qualities and experiences you believe make you an outstanding candidate.

Q: If you were able to work with fellows/attendings from a different residency program and it spurred an interest in that program, would mentioning this be considered "name dropping" (even if a name is not included) or would it be considered genuine?

A: You can always speak the truth in an honest and professional manner.

Q: Will there be a sample autobiographical sketch for reference available?

A: There is no plan to provide a representative autobiographical sketch. We want applicants to use this space to present the qualities and experiences they believe make them an outstanding candidate.

Q: How many programs is it recommended to personalize the personal statement for?

A: No recommendation.

Q: Do you include the autobiographical sketch and the two questions within the same document?

A: Yes.

Q: With two sections: 500-word autobio and two 250-word essay questions, I was wondering if there's some utility in repeating some themes between the two sections. Is there some clarity on what is the minimum that the programs would be using for review?

A: Programs will review all 3 of these carefully, so there is no real need to repeat information among them, unless it is in a different context for some reason. Use the space to highlight your many unique characteristics.

Q: What are your recommendations for subpar depth perception and color blindness in applicants?

A: Check with your local advisor.

Q: Are you supposed to address "Why Ophtho" at all in the ABS? If not, else in the app would we share why we want to go into the field?

A: Yes, the ABS would be good place for 'Why ophthalmology'.

Q: How long is the "Career Objectives" section supposed to be? Is that a mini essay, a short paragraph, or just 2-3 sentences?

A: 2-5 sentences.

Q: Would you recommend just answering 2 out of 4 essay questions? I think I heard you can technically write more than 2?

A: This is at each applicant's discretion which questions they select, but you should just choose 2 of 4 as instructed in the portal.

Q: Should the autobiographical sketch be written in 1st or 3rd person?

A: Opinion vs. rule is 1st person. At your discretion.

Q: Does it help to discuss if your parent is an ophthalmologist in the autobiographical statement or does it indicate privilege?

A: If it is part of your STORY - include it.

Q: If there is a separate section in SF match for career objectives, should career objectives also be addressed in the autobiographical personal statement?

A: You can include anything in the autobiographical sketch that you believe highlights the qualities, skills, experiences that describe who you are and why you are an excellent applicant.

Q: I believe it was mentioned that talking about the “rewarding aspect of ophthalmology” is one of the common/cheesy things found in PS and something to avoid? Or did I not hear this correctly?

A: The concept is to use your interview time and your application essays to express things about yourself that are unique to you. Everyone who is an ophthalmologist already understands what is rewarding about the career. You do not need to use the limited time and space you have to tell them what they already know. Instead, help them understand why YOU are a great candidate because of your own story.

Q: Do you feel like a personalized ABS will have a significant positive impact on an application? (vs negatively impacting if it seems like a form letter with a few words changed)

A: Personalize for the programs you have a personal connection to and a genuine desire to interview. The reviewers are a heterogenous group and you will get a lot of opinions on this.

Q: For unique characteristics on the Dean's Letter, what do most Ophthalmology programs look for? is research/presentations generally supposed to be one of the statements?

A: The noteworthy characteristics should be important aspects of your medical school career. Community activities, research, volunteer efforts are all good things to include.

Q: How do Ophthalmology programs look upon a student that has taken a year for other academic pursuits ex. another Master's?

A: No problem with that at all and it can help tell your story.

Q: If a student has interruption in medical education due to personal health reasons, to what extent should it be addressed/disclosed to prevent possible speculations or assumptions?

A: This should be addressed in your MSPE. You may decide to address this in your applications. It is not that uncommon and worth addressing.

Q: Should we say ‘why ophthalmology’ on our autobiographical sketch?

A: So many opinions on this. We want to know more about you. If this is an important part of your story include it.

Q: Would you see a personal statement regarding one's own challenges with vision as emboldening passion or a red flag for a future surgeon?

A: Depends on how it is written, could be either.

Q: How should you address past careers prior to medical school especially past medical careers (like former nurse)?

A: Your personal statement is a great way to incorporate this.

PGY1 Questions

Q: Does the SF match program search tool indicate which programs are integrated vs not?

A: The type of PGY1 for each program is on the SF Match website.

Q: If you are graduating in May 2023 and taking no gap time, will you need to apply to a joint program?

A: Although your question is not applicable to this application season, we are continuing to refine the review process for our applicants. Check back again next year. Stay tuned.

Q: Are two interviews required for a Joint PGY1 Program (ophthalmology + another department)?

A: Programs will inform you of that when scheduling an interview.

Q: On the SF match program directory if it says the program is 4 years does that mean integrated and the ones that say 3 years are traditional?

A: 4 years means integrated and you should verify this during the interview or any communication with the program. Both Joint and Traditional would be 3 years as the internship is under the direction of a department other than Ophthalmology.

Q: The match into traditional internship is via NRMP. What about the joint/integrated?

A: Joint programs are ERAS/ NRMP. Check with the programs' websites.

Q: Does this mean we should apply to every prelim program through ERAS that is associated with a joint ophthalmology program?

A: You may but most will apply to a few PGY1 programs then expand their list once they get ophthalmology interviews.

Q: If applying to joint programs that requires an ERAS application, are those considered separate interviews/consideration from the ophthalmology residency, or is the ERAS application more of a "formality" for the joint programs?

A: Varies by program. Check with programs for this.

Q: Is it true that we can apply to PGY1 year on NMRP after matching in ophthalmology because the spots are reserved for us in joint programs situations?

A: Check with each program.

Reapplicant Questions

Q: Any advice for reapplicants?

A: A few ideas: try to touch base with programs who interviewed you last year. Perhaps they can identify what were perceived as strengths and weaknesses of your application and/or your interview presence. Look at your previous application and set some goals with regard to application elements that you can improve. It may not be wise to reapply right away if the application you plan to submit looks very similar to the application you submitted previously. If it was your interview that was your weak point...practice, practice, practice.

Q: For reapplicants, do we need a new MSPE, or can we use the one from last year?

A: The MSPE does not change...unless your school has written an addendum. If you have an addendum, you should request this version of the MSPE to be distributed.

Q: Do reapplicants need to use/keep the same SFM profile? What if a new one has already been accidentally created?

A: Check with the SFMatch staff to eliminate an extra profile.

Q: For students who do not match who are committed to reapplying into ophthalmology, should we do a prelim year if we do not match and plan to reapply to the match? If we do so will that prelim year count towards our training?

A: That varies. Check with your school admin and your advisor.

Q: Do reapplicants need to use/keep the same SFM profile?

A: Yes. The system will check the USMLE id number and will not allow you to re-register with a new ID.

Q: How do programs feel about applicants who were already denied from your program in a previous cycle? Is there more scrutiny because it is their second application?

A: Previous applications do not go to the programs, although many programs keep a file of previously interviewed applicants. Programs will make decisions based on the strength of your current application.

Research/Publications Questions

Q: Are research experiences/ case publications necessary?

A: Not necessary but helpful for your competitiveness.

Q: How should publications be represented in SF match that have been accepted for publishing and are in press but are not yet physically published in the journal?

A: List as published and include "in press".

Q: How common is it for students to do a research year while applying for Ophtho? How do residencies view this?

A: This is not uncommon but is a definite minority of candidates. It's best to talk with your advisors to see if this would be helpful for you. In general, it is viewed positively by programs, but of course it depends on the productivity and outcomes from the research time.

Q: On the app, would pending publications go under "publications" or elsewhere? Also, what reads best for listing activities on SF...bullet points/resume style?

A: Bullet points are fine. Readability is important. Pending publications may go under publications.

Q: Is there any general advice in finding a research year position? Is it too late in the game to find one?

A: Check with your school admin and advisors.

Q: Are there official statistics on the number of publications that matched applicants had last year? If so, where can I find them?

A: No. Research is usually just one aspect of an application.

Q: How should patents be listed? Doesn't seem to really fit well in SFMatch's categories under publications.

A: May be listed under related activities.

Q: How to submit more than 20 papers in our application?

A: Check with SFMatch.

Q: Where is the best place to put research publications that are under review/revisions? On SF, "PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES/ABSTRACTS (OTHER THAN PUBLISHED)" seems like the best spot, but it asks for issue number/publication volume.

A: This seems reasonable. Just make sure that it is clear that the submission is under review.

SF Match Questions

Q: Can you speak to how applying to multiple specialties may affect one's ability to Match? Does it make one less competitive or raise red flags?

A: Not a red flag for all, but some may feel differently. Apply to the specialties you are interested in and be prepared to explain why you are doing this. Every applicant is different; you just need to be able to explain your path.

Q: Where can we find this information about each program: "independent vs closely supervised environments, research emphasis" etc.

A: Recommend asking this at interviews, open houses where you can also discuss with residents. Program websites can also be helpful.

Q: Is there a list of ophthalmology programs that are outside of the match?

A: There are no ACGME accredited ophthalmology residency programs outside of the Match.

Q: Do deadlines exist prior to September 1?

A: There is a timeline available on the SF Match site, and in your handout for further details. You will want to register prior to Sept 1st.

Q: Can programs see which programs you applied to and how many?

A: No.

Q: After registering on SF Match, is there anything we need to do as applicants to ensure our medical schools submit transcripts and MSPE? Or do they receive an e-mail automatically from SF Match?

A: Your medical school does receive an e-mail notification, but it is best for you to confirm they have access to uploading your documents.

Q: Just to clarify, the SFMatch portal "protects" us from accidentally scheduling overlapping interviews, correct?

A: Yes, you are correct.

Q: Are there recommended communication restrictions between programs (i.e., application committees, program directors, etc.) and applicants at any point in the cycle?

A: Programs may not initiate any contact with applicants following the interview. If applicants have pertinent questions, they may pose them, and programs may issue a response.

Q: Do programs want to hear updates about new publications, important activities, etc. after the application deadline and before/during/after interviews?

A: Please check with SFMatch as to what can be updated in your application.

Q: Do the program deadlines listed on the match website indicate the date that programs will start reviewing applications or the date they will no longer accept new applications?

A: The programs should define that.

Transcript Questions

Q: Do I need to submit community college transcripts on SFmatch or mention it on my CV if I transferred to another college?

A: You should include that transcript.

Q: If we have a couple classes of credit from a study abroad experience that was sponsored by a U.S. institution other than the one I graduated from, do I need to obtain that transcript?

A: If this study abroad course was credited/noted in your undergraduate institution's transcript, that should be sufficient.

USMLE Questions

Q: In light of the difficulties many individuals have experienced with COVID affecting personal circumstances as well as with Step 1 testing, will Step 2 scores be considered more highly/also be taken into consideration for the score cutoff/filter in applications this year?

A: We are collectively sensitive to the impacts COVID has had on your education journeys. Each program reviews and evaluates applicants uniquely and the value of USMLE can vary across programs. Our goal is to take a holistic view of each applicant. Step scores are just one of many variables programs will consider. Step 2 scores are not required for the application, and it is at your discretion whether to include them or not.

Q: If an applicant's USMLE Step 2 score is available prior to September 1 / deadlines, is it required to upload & share this score on SF Match? Or is it completely optional?

A: This is completely optional at your discretion. If you think it will help your application, upload it. If not, no one will ever know if you took it or not.

Q: What would constitute as a “low” step 1 score that might warrant an explanation?

A: Every program will have a different criteria and most are doing holistic reviews. Certainly, a failure should be addressed. There is not a specific number...rather you could note if you had unique circumstances.

Q: You need to update as Step 1 going P/F and the importance of Step 2?

A: Step 2 scores are not required as part of the application at this time.

Q: When step 1 becomes pass/fail, will a step 2 score be required/expected? Or is it anticipated to stay optional?

A: Although your question is not applicable to this application season, we are continuing to refine the review process for our applicants. Please continue to stay in contact with your mentors, med school advisors, and stay tuned.

Q: Is a step 1 score of 214 in the time of the COVID pandemic necessary to discuss in the autobiographical sketch?

A: You will have a variety of opinions, but recommend addressing unique circumstances, without belaboring the issue. This should be considered in the context of your entire application and your advisor can assist in how to address it.

Q: Is there any way for programs to access Step 2 scores if we rather present Step 1 scores alone upon submission of applications? Will programs request Step 2 scores prior to submitting rank lists?

A: Programs will see Step 2 scores only if you submit them. Neither the SF Match nor the program will request these scores as part of the application process.

Q: If I've already taken step 1 but don't plan to apply until the next cycle (when Step 1 is Pass/Fail), will the numerical score be shown? or will it be displayed as a pass?

A: Neither the USMLE nor the SF Match has issued a decision on this yet.

Q: Is it a red flag to include a step 2 score that is lower than step 1 on your application?

A: Many programs may view this with concern. In general, Step 2 scores are higher than Step 1 nationally. Remember there is no requirement for you to submit Step 2 scores at all, and programs will not have access to them unless you make them part of your application file.

Q: If we are confident in our step 1 score, should we delay taking step 2 CK?

A: Most likely you can delay, and it is important that there are no other issues on your application. You should discuss this with your advisor at the SOM if you have further questions.

Q: What does “better” on step 2 mean? Is there a certain score increase we should be targeting? 5 points? 10 points? 15 points? etc?

A: This varies by program and candidate background.

Q: Unsure if this will be touched on in detail. What is a safe step I score in order to delay taking step 2? 250?

A: There is no entity as a safe score; the relative value of each component in your application depends on the holistic assessment of your complete profile.

Q: If our step 2 will arrive before interview invite dates in October, should we email/update individual programs since it was mentioned not all programs may come back to an application waiting on other components to be added?

A: You can review the SF Match process for specific details on how to best do this; it is at your discretion if you would like to update your application with your Step 2 score.

Q: I know that STEP 2 isn't technically required to apply this year, but when browsing the program summaries on the SF match portal, a few programs require STEP 2 scores before offering an interview. Can someone comment on this observation?

A: Hospital and health care systems generally require a passing step 2 ck score before onboarding a resident. Some programs may have a requirement that prospective applicants on their rank list have a passing step 2 ck score at the time of rank list submission. Many programs just require that Step 2 is passed before starting the PGY1 year. For this reason, SF Match does not require Step 2 scores on the application although some programs may.

Q: If certain programs require a passing STEP 2 score at time of rank list submission for resident onboarding purposes, is this strictly a formality or has the potential to “demote” an applicant on the rank list dependent on score?

A: Checking with the program can be helpful about when they need step 2.

Q: By what date should step 2 be taken in order to meet qualification for ranking by those programs that require it?

A: Check with the program for requirements.

Q: Will programs be able to access our step 2 scores if we took it before September 1 and do not report it? Secondly, will it look bad if we do not report step 2 in comparison to someone who does.

A: No to both.

Q: Do you have to report your step 2 ck score?

A: No. This is completely at your discretion.

Q: Please clarify conflicting information about Step 2 reports above - Dr. Siatkowski commented that submission of Step 2 score report is optional even if score is available prior to Sept 1; Dr. Alabiad stated that the score must be submitted if available prior to Sept 1.

A: When you submit your application, you have to submit a USMLE transcript for Step 1 from the NBME where the score is verified against what you typed in your application. Submitting a score report for Step 2 Ck is at your discretion, but if you decide to include it on the application a formal transcript to confirm it from USMLE is necessary.