

Kevin and Indira's Guide to Getting Into Medical School



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by

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Oregon State University

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Dedication

We dedicate this book to our students.

You have inspired us in ways you will never know.

Preface

Between us, we have taught and advised thousands of students in the life sciences at Oregon State University. Kevin has also been the premedical advisor for many of these students. The advice and strategies compiled in this book have been used, with great success, by our students, and we hope that it is helpful to you, as well. We have put this book together in response to many requests from students, and are happy to have it ready to get out into their hands.

If you like what we've done here, we would love to hear from you. You can contact us at medbook@davincipress.com.

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Getting Started

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The pathway to medical school is a long one and in our experience, many students could benefit from some guidance to help them navigate the system effectively. It is our aim in this book to share some of the advice that we give to our students who are planning to apply to medical school.

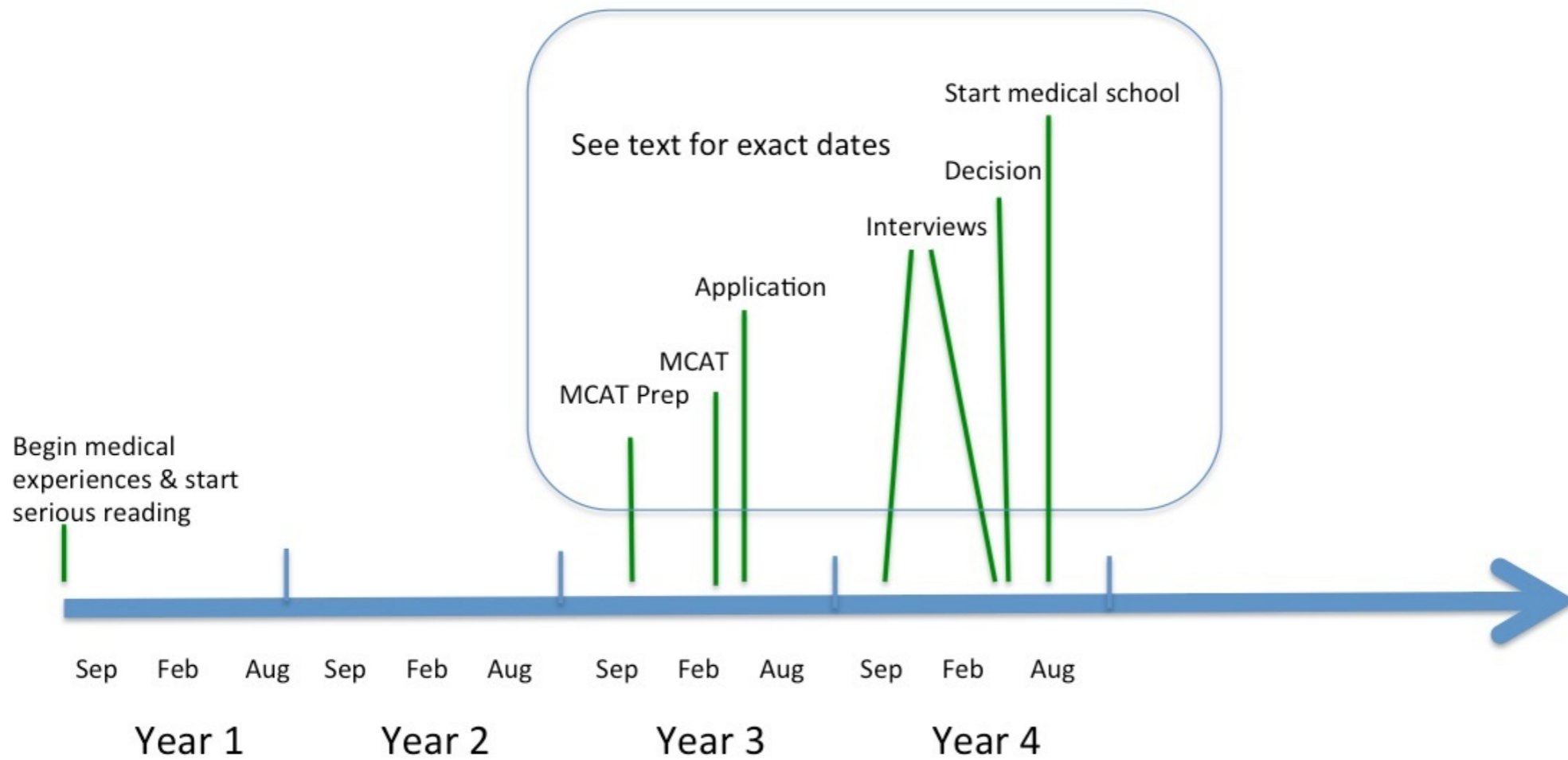
When should you begin preparing to apply?

In planning a strategy for going to medical school, it is important to recognize that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to put together a successful application. Serious preparation for medical school should, ideally, start as soon as a person is headed to college. Starting in your freshman year, you can begin to do things that will make you better prepared for medical school.

Timeline

The timeline (next page) gives an indication of how you should plan your years in college. We recognize that some of you reading this book may not be freshmen and that is fine too, but the timeline should still give you an idea of the amount of preparation it takes to put together a strong application.

Boxed items can be moved forward considerably



Most things that you do before college (besides learning as much as you can) will have virtually no impact on a successful application. The one worthwhile exception is working with a doctor one on one, especially if you are able to maintain the relationship with the physician through your college years. This is because a physician that you have worked with over a long period of time will know you well enough to be able to write you a meaningful and strong letter of recommendation for your application. Other than that, volunteering or extracurricular activities in high school are essentially irrelevant by the time students apply to medical school.

How should you prepare yourself?

In our observations, there are three main things to focus on in your journey to medical school. We call them Performance, Diversity of Knowledge, and Diversity of Experience.

Performance

Performance is a measure of what you know and can do. Students often think, mistakenly, that their GPAs are the most important measure of their knowledge and abilities. Because of this, some pre-meds are misguidedly obsessive about their grades. GPA is only one measure of performance and it is an imperfect one. It makes much more sense to focus on learning as much as possible in every course you take than to fixate on

your grade in the class. If you concentrate on learning, good grades will follow.

MCAT

As far as the medical schools are concerned, a *much* more important measure of your abilities and knowledge is how well you do on the MCAT (Medical College Admission Test). One reason that GPAs take second seat to the MCAT scores is that, as you undoubtedly know, majors differ considerably in their difficulty. Schools, and even individual professors, may also differ in the way they assign grades and in what they teach their students. GPAs have too many variables to be a reliable way to compare applicants from a variety of backgrounds and different institutions. It is for this reason that everyone applying to a medical school in the U.S. is required to take a standardized MCAT. This provides medical schools with a better idea of your knowledge and thinking skills than your GPA alone could.

Not surprisingly, the more you know and remember from your classes, the better your performance on the MCAT. Conversely, students who only take easy classes to get a higher GPA or whine their way to an A by pestering a professor for points, will not be prepared to do well on the all-important MCAT. This is not to say you should let your GPA slide, but that you should remember that you are taking classes, not for the purpose of getting a grade, but as a way to become truly

proficient in subjects you will need to know for the MCAT and as a medical student.

Coursework

Given how much importance it carries, it is worthwhile to consider how one should prepare for the MCAT. Our number one piece of advice, already mentioned above, is to work your rear off learning as much as you can in your classes. Preparation for the MCAT starts with your first college class. Take full advantage of the range of courses offered at your university and take your general education (aka baccalaureate core) requirements seriously.

Some pre-meds have a very narrow vision and want to take only courses that they see as directly pertaining to medicine, avoiding anything else like the plague. This is an unfortunate attitude, for a number of reasons. Learning about the human experience, whether through history, literature, or the social sciences, enriches your understanding of the world. It also improves your cultural competence, which is important if you wish to be a good physician. Even if you think you have no interest in these subjects, you may be surprised to hear that students who major in the humanities consistently outperform science majors on the verbal reasoning section of the MCAT (and often do as well as science majors in the other two sections). Studying the humanities can help develop your

verbal reasoning skills, and improve your performance on the MCAT.

Challenge yourself in your classes as much as possible. If you find yourself struggling to succeed in your classes, take action immediately. Are you doing too many things? Are you needing assistance? Are you taking classes before you are prepared for them? A good advisor can be very helpful. Seek out your academic advisor and if you have one that you're not satisfied with, find someone else.

Your professors can be another source of help. Right from the start of your college career, you would be smart to get to know your professors. They can recommend study strategies and helpful resources, if you are having difficulties in their courses, and even if you aren't. Your aim is to learn each subject well, and who better to help you than your instructors? Too many students never really make use of their most valuable resource in college – the experts who are teaching them. Getting to know your professors has other advantages besides helping you master the subjects you are studying in class. Your professors can help you find research opportunities, give you professional advice, and, if you know them long enough and well enough, would be great references when you apply to medical school. If you made a good grade in his or her course, you may still be able to get a recommendation letter from a professor who doesn't know you personally, but the kind of letter you get from

someone who knows you as an individual is much more meaningful and convincing to the committee that reads it.

Reading, writing, rhetoric... and more

The MCAT currently has three sections – physical sciences, biological sciences, and verbal reasoning (this is in the process of changing). The maximum possible score for each of these sections is 15, for a total of 45. Everyone has their own strengths, but we find that science students often perform poorly in verbal reasoning. In this section, students are challenged, under the pressure of a clock, to demonstrate how well they read, comprehend, analyze, and retain information. The skills required for verbal reasoning cannot be acquired by short bursts of cramming. Making improvements in this area takes time – lots of time.

We recommend to our students that they get a subscription to the *New York Times* and read it cover to cover, every day. That's right – read it cover to cover, every day. That's going to take some time. It is important that you set aside a period of time to read it daily, so block it out in your planner, just as you would a class. Student subscriptions are surprisingly affordable, and your university library may also have a subscription, so cost should not be a deterrent. The printed version is actually preferable, because people tend to stick with reading print articles longer than they do the online version. If you use the online version, you *must* discipline yourself to read

entire articles and not just skim them. The reason the *New York Times* is a good choice is that the quality of the writing is high and the articles are on a variety of subjects, from current events to economics to the arts and literature, giving you practice in reading and understanding subjects that you may not be studying in your classes. The longer you do this, the better your reading skills will be. You are kidding yourself if you think doing this for a couple of months is going to make any significant difference. It isn't. We recommend doing this for at least a year, and ideally, longer.

We also suggest that students take philosophy courses and work on their writing skills, especially grammar and creative writing. Philosophy courses strengthen your critical thinking and reasoning abilities, skills that are important in all professions, and, indeed, in life. Some philosophy courses also focus on ethics, which is of great importance in medicine. Philosophy is also going to be of increasing importance, as the MCAT begins moving towards requiring greater competence in the liberal arts. Because studying philosophy improves your thinking, it will help you in your interview, in your personal statements, and in your life. Don't hesitate - take philosophy courses. Courses in creative writing and grammar are also highly recommended. Creative writing will help you to be interesting and original in your writing (critical for personal statements) and grammar is absolutely vital, because good grammar is expected of a professional.

Test preparation

Serious preparation specifically for the MCAT begins about 6 months before you plan to take it. With respect to MCAT preparation, there are services, such as Kaplan, that will help you to prepare for the MCAT and charge you a pretty good fee for their services. Satisfaction with these courses varies widely and we are reluctant to recommend them to all students. There are some people who do benefit from them, though. They include students who are not very efficient at organizing their time or who lack the discipline to study regularly. If you are self-disciplined and motivated, you may find these services to be of less value than they are to your friends who need more externally imposed structure.

During the run up to actually taking the exam, we strongly recommend that students take online practice exams (from the AAMC – makers of the MCAT) to monitor their progress. A good time to take the first one is when you start your six-month intense preparation. This will enable you to identify the areas that you need to work on the most. There are limited numbers of practice exams available, so don't go taking them as a lark. Also, don't kid yourself about your scores. The scores students make on practice exams are almost always higher than their scores on the actual exam. Thus, you should not be surprised if your actual exam scores are 3-4 points below your best practice exam scores.

When to take the exam

Because you should expect to spend a good six months working intensely on preparation for the exam, it is wise to plan a reduced class load during this time, if you are still in school. Begin working on your weakest area (as shown by your practice scores) first. We generally advise students to take the exam in April, so a good time to start intensive studying would be October-November. Students often want to take their exam after summer vacation, in the fall, but individuals who do this deprive themselves of 6-8 months of additional study time that those who take the exam in April get. While your mileage may vary, we still think April is better than fall. It takes about a month to get your scores, so you will have ample time to have your scores in hand before you apply in June.

Under no circumstances should you take the “real” MCAT until you are sure your practice scores are consistently higher than they need to be for you to get into your target schools. This typically means scores in the 30s (or even higher if you are applying to highly selective schools). A major mistake students make is taking the exam before they are sufficiently prepared for it. Doing this shows very poor judgment. Why? Because you really get only two good shots at the MCAT. If you waste the first one, the pressure on you to do well the second time is immense. We have never known a student who blew off the first

exam, by being unprepared, who didn't have enormous regrets about it later.

Yes, students do sometimes take the MCAT more than twice and get in to medical school, but it is rare. Let's imagine you took the MCAT three times. The first two times you made a 24 and the third time you made a 32. You look at that 32 and think you've got it made. The medical school may look at that 32 and wonder why they should believe it more than the two scores of 24 – they may think the 32 was a lucky fluke. The more bad scores you have, the slimmer your chances of going to medical school. Bottom line – it is far better to delay an application by a year, and be properly prepared for the MCAT, than to take any chances on not being ready because you are in a hurry. Another piece of advice we give our students is to not, under any circumstances, plan to take the MCAT until they have *completed at least two terms of biochemistry*. We have never known a student to score well on the MCAT without formal biochemistry coursework, and yes, we have known numerous students who have been unsuccessful, after convincing themselves they can learn it on their own.

D.O. vs M.D.

Osteopathic medical schools tend to accept students with lower MCAT scores than allopathic schools, but we emphasize that your decision regarding which school to apply to should *not* be

driven by your MCAT scores. Osteopathic medicine is different from allopathic medicine in approach. Each has its advantages and disadvantages and you should choose one based on your personal preference for one approach over the other. D.O. schools are not a consolation prize if you fail to make it into an M.D. program. For this reason, we also recommend against applying to both types of schools at the same time.

If you want to be an M.D. and your MCAT scores are too low to get you into the school of your choice, then it is better to retake the exam and apply the following year than to go into a program that is not the right fit for you. Think about it – isn't getting your career right worth an extra year of your time?

Diversity of knowledge

The second key part of preparation for medical school is what we call diversity of knowledge. Your knowledge has to be broad, which means it must come from *many areas*. Pre-med students who major in the sciences need to expand their academic horizons and take classes in the humanities and social sciences. Philosophy, as mentioned earlier, is a good choice. Achieving breadth, for science students, means taking classes that don't have any words in their title that relate to medicine. Yes, you can, and should, take medical ethics, but if you want breadth, take some history, some theatre, some sociology, and some psychology. As noted, the MCAT is

moving towards requiring more knowledge in the liberal arts and with good reason. Before you can be a good doctor (or anything else) you must be an educated human being.

The advice for pre-medical students who are majoring in the liberal arts is the opposite. Take as much science as you can fit into your schedule. Math is essential for success in the sciences. If you first build a strong foundation in math, you are much more likely to have success, subsequently, in chemistry, physics, and biochemistry. Though there are exceptions, liberal arts students will tend to excel in verbal reasoning and fare worse in physical sciences, whereas science students will tend to have the opposite profile – best in biological or physical sciences and worst in verbal reasoning. The best students, regardless of their majors, will ensure that they are strong in all areas. Remember that a poor performance in any section will lower your overall MCAT score and your likelihood of acceptance into medical school.

Diversity of experience

There is much more to an education and to being a person than what one learns in a classroom. A physician is a contributing, participating member of society who interacts with dozens of people daily. Having strong people skills and the ability to relate to individuals from all walks of life is critical. It is for this reason that getting experience in diverse life settings is important.

Relevant life experiences include community involvement (volunteering), social interaction (clubs, leadership), people-oriented jobs (barista or food service, for example), and challenging work environments (e.g., customer service), to name only a few. Evidence of your participation in such activities is golden. If we have students applying for medical school that we know have worked as servers in a restaurant, we always mention this fact in our reference letters, because being a server requires good communication skills and the ability to handle difficult people – exactly the sort of skills a physician would need.

Medical Experience

A critical component of breadth of experience is obtained by working one on one with a physician. Many students wait way too long before they get experience working with a physician. This creates a very poor impression on the medical schools reviewing an application. If you are a freshman at college and you haven't started shadowing a doctor, then you are falling behind. The clock is ticking. You should plan on at least two years of experience with a physician. It is this aspect of preparation for medical school that students can, and should, start on early. We actually encourage high school students who have an interest in medical school to start working with a doctor before coming to college. This is because the *best* thing you can do is to get a lot of experience working with a physician

over a long period of time. Spending a significant amount of time in a medical setting will teach you a lot and reflect your commitment to medicine. Also, keep in mind that physicians who write a recommendation letter may indicate how long they have known you and how well. A letter from a doctor who knows you only slightly and has had very little opportunity to observe you will, naturally, not carry much weight. The very best letters of reference for medical school applications come from doctors who have known, and worked with, the student for an extended period.

Here's a little tip that you won't hear in other places – the hardest place to get shadowing experience is in a college town (unless your college is in a large metropolitan area). College towns are notorious for having way more pre-med students than physicians, making it extremely challenging to find a doctor to shadow. This means that you need to look elsewhere, ideally to a physician in your hometown, to get this experience.

Preparing to apply

The medical school application in the U.S. is done online: (<https://www.aamc.org/students/applying/amcas/>). Expect that you should start to work on it about June 1 and have it submitted no later than July 15. Before you submit your application, you should have your MCAT scores in hand and they should be up to the standards of the schools to which you are applying.

Plan to follow this timeline carefully. Medical schools will allow you to apply way into the fall, but the success rates decrease with time. The clock starts ticking after July 15.

Make absolutely sure to have your MCAT scores in hand, before you apply. This means if you didn't take the MCAT in time to have scores by July 15, then you should plan to apply the following year. You may hear some people say that this doesn't matter and that you can apply whenever you want. It is true that medical schools will accept your application later, and it is also true that some students get in with later applications. But, remember that it could take AMCAS up to 2 months after you submit your application to verify your application, and medical schools will not begin reviewing your application till that happens and they have received your secondary essays, etc. Students applying early will have their applications viewed first and will be compared against a relatively smaller pool of applicants than individuals who apply later. Also, remember that the later your application is reviewed, the fewer the interview slots that remain. For something as important as medical school, it pays to leave nothing to chance. You want to get into the best possible school with the best possible chance. Timing makes a difference. Also, while you can, of course, reapply if your first application is rejected, remember that a rejection will have an inevitable effect on your confidence (not to mention your wallet). If you can reapply, you can wait a year and do it right the first time.



Personal Statement

Personal Statement

Setting yourself apart

You are not a list

Content

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Show, don't tell

Problem words

Writing a good personal statement is essential for getting an interview. A quick search of the Internet will return countless examples of personal statements as well as tips for writing them. You may also be tempted to look for a formula (we use the word 'formula' here as a set of instructions for how to write a good statement). Big mistake. There are plenty of formulas out there for writing personal statements, but think about it. What are formulas good for? Reproducing things so they always come out the same. Formulas are useful when we don't want any variation from a norm. It makes sense to use a formula of 3 parts gravel to 2 parts sand to 1 part cement when mixing concrete, because we don't want one batch to be different from another. A personal statement, by contrast, is intended to portray you, a one-of-a-kind individual. If what you want to do is reproduce someone else's personal statement, then go seek a formula, by all means, but what you will get is a personal statement that sounds just like that of everyone else who used that formula (yawn). If you want to write a personal statement that is interesting and makes you stand out from the crowd, then stay away from formulas.

Setting yourself apart

Identifying what is different/unique about you is vital for your success. Keep this in mind as you're writing your statement and as you are preparing for your interview. If you look and

sound like everyone else, your chances of being remembered are low and you reduce your chances of acceptance to that of drawing your name out of a hat. You do not want to do that – you’ve worked too hard to leave something this important to chance.

The more your personal statement sounds like anyone else’s personal statement, the less interested in you a committee will be. Uniqueness does not come from formulas. Uniqueness comes from (are you ready to hear this?) your specific set of life experiences, and your singular perspective. Demonstration of personal growth and insights, as well as maturity and concern for others are appropriate themes in personal statements.

Sometimes, an applicant may have faced great challenges in life. Some students overcome poverty, disability, illness or family dysfunction to graduate from college and apply to medical school. These experiences have, doubtless, played a role in shaping them as individuals, and as such, are appropriate to bring up in a personal statement. If you have experienced such challenges, an account of how you prevailed in difficult circumstances can make for a very powerful personal statement. But think carefully about how much you want to share. Err on the side of being as personal as you can without getting emotional. That is, if you have very difficult things to say, you may put them into your statement, so long as they do not make you upset if you are asked about them in your

interview. (Under almost any circumstances, crying in an interview will not be acceptable.)

You are not a list

One of the things you may be tempted to do is compile a list of accomplishments and put that into your statement. This is not a good idea. A personal statement is intended to define your personality, a task that takes introspection, insights, and honesty. Lists, on the other hand, tell people nothing about you other than that you have done many things. It is not the number of things you have done that defines you. It is the quality of the experiences you have had, and how they have influenced you, that make you who you are. People who define themselves by lists of accomplishments run the risk of sounding as if they view their experiences simply as notches on a belt, not as real live, meaningful events that had intrinsic value. Value is measured by the quality and impact of the experience, not by whether you think it sounds good to an interview committee. Worst of all, if the interview committee suspects you are a notch-seeker, you can kiss your chances goodbye.

As you are probably coming to realize, it is easy to discuss what not to do in a personal statement. It is much more difficult to talk about what works. Here is what we have seen. A solid personal statement will be

-
- Interesting
 - Compelling
 - Easy to read
 - Original
 - Something that makes the reader curious about you
 - Accurately and uniquely you

You might say the same thing about a work of Hemingway, at least for the first four qualities. Just as we could not tell you how to write a Hemingway novel, so too are we unable to tell you how to write your statement. Below are our best thoughts on the subject, though.

Content

If there was ever a time for you to think creatively, this is it. There is nothing worse than a boring personal statement, unless it is a boring interview. More to the point, a boring personal statement may torpedo your chances of ever getting an interview. The personal statement paints a picture of you to the selection committee. If it is interesting and sounds genuine, the committee may want to know more about you and invite you to interview. If it sounds canned or phony, can you blame them for putting your application in the “Reject” pile?

A good personal statement is introspective, but not obsessive. It reveals qualities about you without making you sound self-centered or narcissistic. It is honest and it is open. It should be easy to read and it should reveal you to have some depth. If you have to struggle to find depth, the interviewers are going to have an even harder time.

Adult experiences

One of the most important things you must demonstrate in your personal statement and your interview is that you are an adult. You no doubt see yourself as an adult, but that doesn't mean that you are one or that others will see you as one. Not appearing adult is an automatic way to be given a few more years to grow up before being considered again.

Mind your language

Your written language conveys a *lot* about you. Besides correct grammar and spelling, style is important. How do you construct your sentences? If you don't know the value of short sentences interspersed with longer ones, then go back to writing class. How do you use words? If the committee senses that you are throwing around big words that you don't normally use or if you use them improperly, you're in trouble. A too simple vocabulary is problematic, as well – you want to sound like an adult, who can use language confidently and with nuance, not like a third-

grader. Also, remember, if you don't sound, in person, like the voice in your personal statement, the committee will wonder whether you wrote it yourself. Thus, a good recommendation is that you should write in the language you speak, though written language is, understandably, more formal than our everyday speech. If you have worked consistently on your writing skills and read widely, you will be able to write convincingly and well.

Purpose

The purpose of the personal statement is to give the selection committee a sense of who you are as a person. An effective way to do this is to employ a story or two (naturally, these should be true, not fictional). The stories don't have to focus entirely on medicine. In fact, the best personal statement for medical school that we have read was an account by a student about her training to achieve her black belt in karate. By the end of this statement, it was clear that this was a person who cared about people, who was clear about her goals, who was unwavering in her resolution and who was going to be a great physician. Can you imagine how you might achieve this?

One problem arises when students have in their heads that every other word or sentence they use has to involve medicine. BORING. Even the most dedicated physician in the world has skills and interests besides medicine. These talents may well make a person a better doctor. So, although you do want to

convince the committee that you are truly passionate about medicine, think about how to communicate that idea without outright stating it in so many words. One reason for this advice is that pretty much anyone can claim to be dedicated to medicine, hardworking, brilliant or compassionate. If you are compassionate, then your actions reveal that compassion.

Show, don't tell

Conveying to a reader that you are compassionate should be the easiest thing in the world, but many students think too literally and write too literally – “I am compassionate because People trained in science (like the committee reviewing your application) will look for evidence and come to their own conclusions about your compassion, brilliance or dedication. This is why it is better to provide the committee with information that will help them decide for themselves who you are than to *tell* them directly. Almost anytime you start a sentence with the words “I am . . .” and follow it with a trait, you are in trouble. Remember, your story reveals who you are, not the words “I am.”

Problem words

After you have satisfied yourself about the content of your statement, read it carefully, watching out for some problem words. Many students seem to *love* the words ‘always’ and ‘constantly.’ Why? Because they see these words as sounding emphatic. “I

always win at Scrabble” or “I’m constantly working” Let’s face it. You can’t ‘always’ or ‘constantly’ do anything except breathe and metabolize. Any other time you use these words, you are exaggerating. Exaggerating is a form of dishonesty. If you told the interviewers you were six feet four inches tall and then you walked in at five feet eight inches, would you have credibility? Though all you did was exaggerate, you would be considered a liar. Exaggerations will not make your statement any better or more convincing. Instead, statements built on exaggerations will sound clichéd or unbelievable.

Another problem word at the other end of the spectrum is ‘never’. Though it is, perhaps, more likely that you could truthfully use the word ‘never’, the word is still overused. Don’t use ‘never’ unless you literally mean never. Other problem words include ‘every,’ ‘forever,’ ‘continually,’ and ‘must.’ Think carefully, when you use these words, about whether they are accurate in the context that you are using them.

The Application



The Application Process

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Most students find the application process to be a bit stressful and it takes a while to complete. While some of the application materials are straightforward, like your transcript, your MCAT scores and your personal information, other parts of the application will require a fair amount of thought.

A good deal of the time is spent in putting together the personal statement that we have already discussed. Because it takes a while, students will often want to complete it early. While we do not recommend waiting to the last minute, neither is it wise to write your personal statement sooner than a couple of months before you apply. Things change and you want your personal statement to be up to date. If you do it too soon, you will not have the benefit of including important experiences that may be relevant to your application.

References

References are a very important part of the application. You should plan on a diverse set. In our experience having two science professors, two non-scientists, and two medical professionals is a good mix. Some advisors recommend (or even insist) on having, as one of the reference letter writers, a professor in the discipline you majored in. That's not a bad idea.

Ideally, you should contact your reference writers *at least a month* before the letters are due. While your reference letters are a top priority for you, your letter writers are busy professionals who probably have one or two other matters on their minds. You are asking a favor, and courtesy demands that you give them plenty of notice. Your request to your letter-writers should include your resume with a picture of you on it, a good draft of your personal statement (though it doesn't have to be in its final form), and a note thanking them for being willing to write you a recommendation. The letter should state when you plan to apply, when and where the letters are to be sent, and how you have interacted with the professor ("I was really happy to take your BI 211 class in the fall of 2010"). This last statement is important because professors sometimes aren't sure which class a student was in or when. If you give them a class and a date, they can check their records on you.

Though you may be tempted to do so, you should not request letters from professors from whom you have received grades lower than a B. Preferably, you will have earned an A in the classes of the professors you approach to ask for letters of support. In fact, ideally, not only should you have performed well in their courses, you should know them well enough that they don't have to rack their brains to remember who you are. Just as with the physician(s) you plan to use as references, the better your professors know you, the stronger their letter of support can be. If all they know is that you took a class with them three

years ago (based on your information and their grade records) even if you made an A, they won't have much else to say about you, other than that fact. This is not terribly useful, because if the medical school wants to know how you did in Introductory Biology, they can look up your transcript. The reference letters should be doing more than repeating information that is available elsewhere in your application.

Gentle reminders

If any recommendation letters are not received by a week before your deadline, it may mean that your references will still get them in on time, or it may mean that it has slipped their minds. Sometimes, even well meaning references will forget that they promised to write you a letter. If so, don't panic. We suggest to students that, close to the date that the letter is due, they send an e-mail to their reference writers.

This e-mail should start by thanking the letter writer for their willingness to write a letter for you and then should note that according to the intended recipient(s), the letter has not been received. You should ask the writer to please check his/her records and send another copy of the letter, if possible, as soon as they can, as the deadline is near and a late letter may jeopardize your application. Sometimes, it can be useful to give letter writers an artificially early deadline (say April 1, when the actual deadline is April 15) to give you, and them, some breathing

room. A sure way to get onto the wrong side of a letter writer is to give them too little time to get a letter in, so plan ahead.

Another major component of your application is a list of 15 significant things you have done. Ideally, these will be diverse and non-redundant. It is here that your diversity of experience will be very important. If you've been busy with various extracurricular activities since you've been in college, this should be a snap. On the other hand, if all you did was go to classes, you'll find this hard to do.

One additional application consideration - as mentioned earlier, we do not recommend applying to both D.O. schools and M.D. schools simultaneously, but some people do it, anyway. One thing you should know about D.O. schools is that they will usually expect you to have shadowed a D.O. and that D.O. should have written a letter for you. If you're thinking of going the D.O. route, get busy looking for a D.O. to shadow.

Secondaries

Once you've clicked that button to submit your application, the wheels get turning. The first evidence of this is that you will often get a very quick reply from some schools, for what are called secondaries. These are requests for secondary information to supplement your primary application and consist (typically) of some short essay questions, along with a request for money. It is important for you to respond promptly and get your

secondaries in ASAP. We recommend that students take no more than two weeks, at most, to return their secondary application materials (remember that your application will not be reviewed till they are in). This means that if you're thinking of traveling after you submit your application, you might want to wait until you have completed and sent off your secondaries. Schools differ considerably in how long they take to get these sent out and a given school may vary from year to year, so it is hard to predict exactly when you can expect them.

The waiting game

One of the most difficult parts of the application process is how long it takes. After you submit your application, you're going to want things to get rolling and when they don't move at the pace you'd like, you may start to feel stressed. You will also be tempted to contact the schools to make sure everything is OK, etc. Once the schools have received all the necessary documents, you should get notices from schools telling you that your application materials are complete. If, six weeks after you've gotten everything submitted, you haven't heard, then it is OK to send a message to a school and ask if your application is complete. If it is, then you've done your part and now you get to wait to hear from the schools.

Waiting can be really tough and a month or two after submitting your application you may find yourself getting anxious. You'll be tempted to contact the school again, but you want to be very careful about this. Under no circumstances do you want to become a pest. If you repeatedly contact the school, you will be viewed as a pest by the office personnel who handle your call or email. They are human. They also may have hundreds of students bugging them. You do not want to achieve the dubious distinction of being high on their list of annoying people. Remember that the office personnel have the ear of the admissions committee and you don't need your committee to hear that you are a neurotic pain in the rear. We recommend no more than two communications with the admissions office, unless there is something seriously wrong. You want to use these two chances wisely. If you blow them both early, then you will be climbing the walls after your interview, if you haven't heard back. If you plan on one communication before you interview and one after, that is probably OK. The one after you interview should be used strategically and only if necessary. We'll discuss that below after the section on the interview, itself.



The Interview

The Interview

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Overview

In planning for your interview, it is important to think about its purpose. Up until the point they meet you at the interview, you are a virtual entity to the committee, unless you have worked at the school you are applying to. That virtual entity has grades, MCAT scores, and an interesting personal statement, but is not a living, breathing being. If you did a good job, your personal statement will have helped you stand out from the crowd of applicants. The interview will (ideally) extend this distinction even further and a lot of our advice is aimed at that. An interview committee wants to “see you in action.” They will be looking at you with one primary question in the back of their minds – “Can I imagine this person interacting favorably with patients and being a doctor?”

Interviewers

It is useful to recognize that interviews are generally no fun for either the interviewer or the interviewee. From the interviewers’ point of view, they are a necessary evil, but each interviewer will approach that responsibility from a different perspective. Most will be professional, alert, attentive, and genuinely interested. Some, however, may not. You will have no control over the individuals who interview you. It is your task to be sure that, no matter what type of interviewers you have, you put your best foot forward to impress them. An otherwise grumpy interviewer, who sees something to like in a

person, can be a surprisingly strong advocate for that person, during the deliberations of the committee. Remember, also, that interviewers will generally be seeing a *lot* of interviewees and it is very easy for them all to run into one big blur. This is why it is vital that you be distinctive and give them something to remember.

All the people who will interview you have already been through what you are just experiencing for the first time. To you, it seems like (and is) an enormous deal. To them, it is not. There are much bigger things in life and in your career than this interview. Yes, the interview is important and yes, you want to nail it, but a career in medicine will require you to be able to handle life and death situations, fear, anxiety, and pain, among many other challenges. If the message you communicate in your interview is that the interview itself is the biggest challenge in your life and “once I get through this, I’ll be OK,” then you really aren’t ready to take that next step. There is a *lot* ahead of you and when you look back, you, too, will see the interview in the proper perspective.

What impression do you want to make?

Interviewers are generally going to be older than you, unless you are an older than average student. People tend to conflate age with maturity and while these two things generally increase together, there are definitely exceptions. If you are, or appear, very young, people may, fairly or unfairly, perceive you as

immature. That stereotype must be overcome with answers that demonstrate your maturity. More on that later.

You should look at the interview as an opportunity to showcase yourself. If you view the interview as a test where you must give the right answers to the questions, you will have missed the point. Every question you are asked is an opportunity and you need to be thinking of how that opportunity can be used to have the interviewer(s) see you as a physician. You should go into the interview thinking about the traits, experiences, and perspectives that you want the committee to see and know about you. This will be the goal of your interview. If you get these points across effectively, you can pat yourself on the back.

Preparation

A terrific way to put your nervous energy to use while you are waiting to hear from the schools is to prepare yourself well for the interview. Apart from giving you something to focus on, this is useful, because almost no one can shine in an interview without proper preparation. Fortunately, you have the time and you can use it to work on your skills. In the section on the actual interview, you’ll notice that you will be expected to be smiling, alert, relaxed, thoughtful, confident and if you can manage it, utterly charming. You must remember to sit upright, not fiddle with your hands, make eye contact, not giggle nervously, be articulate and impress the committee with your intelligence, wit and charisma. Not a whole lot to expect of someone

whose stomach is churning nervously, huh? Well, the beauty of preparation is that it can help calm your nerves and increase your self-confidence. Athletes and performers know this very well. The hundreds of hours of practice they put in ensure that on the day of the big game or performance, they go out in front of the crowd and perform flawlessly. To the casual observer, it all seems effortless. You, too can look poised, and perform, if not flawlessly, certainly with confidence and grace, if you are willing to work on your preparation.

How should you prepare? Take time to become aware of the impression you make on other people, as well as your speech patterns or nervous tics. None of these can be changed overnight. The sooner you start, the better off you'll be. Some tips and exercises that we have used to help our students prepare for the interview are provided later in the book ([HERE](#)), with explanations of the purpose of each one. There are also some questions for you to start thinking about. By the time you work through these tasks sufficiently to be well prepared, those endless days of waiting will have flown by and you will be the happy recipient of – an invitation to interview.

The invitation

Second only to an acceptance letter, the invitation to interview at a school is the most exciting piece of mail you will receive on your journey to medical school. You should justifiably feel great about this. You've worked hard in your classes, at volunteering, on the MCAT, and in medical settings. Your dreams

are coming true, but there is that one last big hurdle to get over – the interview. We are going to use quite a bit of space here to help prepare you for the “big day.”

The big day

In a way, your interview began when your personal statement was read for the first time. The school you are interviewing at thinks of you as a composite of your academic performance (MCAT, GPA) your reference letters, and your personal statement. Unless you have other connections with the school, such as working there, the “you” they know is that virtual person. They are interviewing you because they like that virtual person and see the potential for that person to be successful in the field of medicine. You've got a head start and your job is to use that momentum to move you forward.

Getting to your interview

In getting ready for the big day, plan to arrive in the city where the interview will occur at least one day before the interview. Don't take a red-eye for an interview later the next afternoon. You will want to get into town and take a taxi to the site of the interview the night before, so you see where it is and you know about how long it will take to get there. You should ask the taxi driver what morning rush hour traffic is like, as that may lengthen a trip considerably. When you get back to your room, iron anything that may have gotten wrinkled, hang up your

interview clothes, then have a relaxing evening and get to bed early to get plenty of rest. If you're anxious, a glass of wine may help you to fall asleep.

Don't forget to ask the front desk for a wake-up call that gives you plenty of time to get properly dressed and eat breakfast before leaving for the interview. Using a second, backup alarm is also a good idea. You may think you don't want breakfast, but you want to be at your best and having your rumbling stomach drown out an interviewer's question may not be helpful to your cause.

So as not to be late, and to reduce your anxiety level, plan to be at the site of the interview about an hour before they are expecting you. Feeling like you're running late is a sure way to increase your anxiety on what may be a fairly stressful day. Wait to go into the interview location, though, until about 5 minutes before you're expected. You can use the extra time to take a long walk. A walk is a wonderful way to burn off nervous energy and we recommend it strongly. Plan a walk. If the weather isn't conducive to walking outdoors, you can walk around indoors till it's time to show up.

Timing

If you were asked to arrive at 9:00, it's OK to be there at 8:55. Before you go in, remember that first impressions usually set the tone of the entire interview. You're going to be working to manage these. Consider that your interview has begun the

instant you arrive at the front desk. You likely will be greeted by a receptionist. When you greet the receptionist, be friendly. Remember that in an interview, your smile is your best friend. A smile communicates comfort and ease and is a great body language tool you can use in your favor. It is one of several things that you will have to consciously remind yourself to do, because when people get nervous, their first response is to frown and look very serious. It is important for you to project an image of friendliness. The interviewers will spend a good deal of time trying to assess how well you will be able to work with people. If you can't come across as a people person in your interview, you are doomed. Smile, smile, smile. An interesting discovery that psychologists have made is that how you act can affect how you feel. In this case, smiling and behaving in a relaxed manner can help you to actually feel that way.

It is also important to try to "read" the other person. Start with the receptionist. If he/she looks open to conversation, make a comment about the weather or something in the news. You're not trying to engage in a deep conversation – just something light – the sort of pleasantries that smooth everyday interactions. It will not hurt you if the receptionist speaks favorably about you to the interviewers.

Set the tone

When the interviewer comes to greet you to take you to the site of the interview, you must set the tone of the interaction,

with your very first actions. First, if you are sitting, jump to your feet and walk over to her/him. Do *not* wait passively for them to come to you. Second, on your way over to the interviewer, extend your hand. Do *not* wait for them to give you their hand. Third, give the person a firm handshake. A limp, wimpy handshake is bad. You do not need to crush the other person's hand, but match their firmness with yours. Fourth, you should introduce yourself – “I'm Kevin Ahern and I'm pleased to meet you.” If you are wondering how to address your interviewers, take your cue from the way they introduce themselves. If your interviewer introduces herself as “Jane” then that's how you should address her. If she says, “Hi, I'm Dr. Smith”, then address her as Dr. Smith.

Taking charge

The reason for all of these actions is to “take charge of the interview.” If you wait for the interviewers to take the lead, you have given control of the interview over to them. Why is it important not to do this? It is essential for you to be perceived by the interviewers as an adult and an equal, not as a subordinate or child. If you act like a subordinate, you will be viewed as one. This is bad. You are aspiring to be a professional like the people interviewing you. Though your position, currently, is different from theirs, you need to show that you know how to act like a professional. Act like an equal to be treated like one. As you walk back to the interview room with the interviewer, walk *beside* the interviewer, not behind them. You are an

equal, not a follower. To learn more about professional and adult demeanor, see the section on [Sounding Like an Adult](#).

When you arrive at the interview room, you may have a panel of interviewers or it may be only the person who walked you there. If you have a panel of interviewers, use the same advice as when you met the first person – take charge, shake hands, introduce yourself. The only exception to that is if the room is structured so that it would be awkward for you to shake hands. In that case, acknowledge them and introduce yourself. The person who walked you back to the room may introduce you, so don't make a production of it. You must get each of the interviewer's names and remember them so that you can refer to them by name when you reply to questions. You aren't going to say a name every time you look at someone, but it is good to work in each interviewer's name once during the interview.

Body language

As you get started, take a few seconds for a quick body language check. First, are you smiling? Second, after you sit down, make eye contact with your interviewers. Third, and this is important, separate your hands and don't let them touch each other during the interview. Why? When people get nervous, they hold their hands together. When your hands are holding onto each other for dear life, they are *not* communicating for you. Remember that you are trying to show them that you are a people person. This means you need to be an effective communicator. Your hands are useful for making your points

and coming across clearly. The more your hands hold onto each other, the less of a communicator you will appear. Remember to keep those hands apart. Fourth, as you are sitting down, do *not* get comfortable. Don't lean back in your chair. In fact, your back should not touch the back of the chair. Leaning forward shows interest on your part and is not a bad image to be communicating. Fifth, in answering questions, do *not* look up when you are thinking. Why? If you've ever watched people taking an exam, you will know what looking upwards communicates. That's what students do when they are trying to pull something out of memory. You've probably done it on every exam you've ever taken. Why is that bad? It's bad because you do *not* want your answers to look like they were memorized. It is much better to get in the habit of looking *down* when you try to recall something. The visual effect of looking down is one of thoughtfulness, not of pulling things out of memory.

Use your voice

Students worry almost universally about how often they say "uh" or "um". Here's a piece of good news - it doesn't matter a bit. Interviews are not speeches. They are conversations. In fact, the more conversational your speech is, the better. The more you think about uhs and ums, the less time you have to think about things that matter. Let it rest. Far worse than ums and uhs are nervous giggles and trailing off in volume at the end of sentences. Nervous laughter conveys anxiety and

approval-seeking. Trailing off in volume signals uncertainty. The ends of your sentences should be as strong as the beginnings. This helps you to project an air of assurance.

Projecting confidence

You are probably nervous, but it is important for you to appear poised. How do you project self-confidence in an interview? First, as already mentioned, smile. Obviously, you don't want a nervous grin plastered permanently on your face throughout the interview (particularly not when the conversation turns to serious matters, such as death, for example). You also don't want to appear smug or overly confident. It's useful to think of how you would behave if you met someone you found attractive – perhaps a potential significant other. When you interact with this person, you naturally want to put your best foot forward. You would be attentive, smiling warmly, and engaging in conversation. That is your aim here. You want to be natural, friendly and conversational. (If your usual response to meeting someone you find interesting is to lose your voice and turn into a puddle, practice in being relaxed and responsive might help you in your personal, as well as your professional, life – win-win!)

Size matters

Physical size is something that people often link with confidence. It is something you have little control over, but you can help manage the interviewers' perceptions of you. If you are petite, you don't want to come across as a pushover, so demonstrating some strength of character will be essential. This is achieved partly through the sorts of answers you give to questions, partly by how self-assured your manner is and partly by the sound of your voice. Size is not the sole determinant of how you are seen. Your voice is critical. You can project confidence in the pitch and volume of your voice. If you naturally boom things out, you will not have to worry about this, but if you are petite and have a high pitched or very soft voice, it is time to learn to *project your voice*. This doesn't mean you have to yell, but that you may have to practice speaking louder than you are accustomed to, making sure to articulate clearly. If your voice is naturally high pitched, practice speaking in a lower register. Having a faint voice, no matter your size, gives an impression of weakness. You don't want people to dismiss you because you sound squeaky or are mumbling to yourself.

On the other hand, if you are a big, physically imposing person, it is important that your gentle side be perceived. You might be world's biggest teddy bear, but strangers don't know that about you. If you're large and want to reduce the threatening impression that comes with your size, it is important for you to 1) pay attention very closely – because you don't want to appear to “blow off” questions; 2) smile, smile, smile; and 3)

laugh. Yes, laugh. It is OK to even be slightly self-deprecating in your humor. Make a joke about yourself that refers to your size in a tongue-in-cheek way. You don't want to fixate on it, but one humorous remark may make you look a heck of a lot more approachable. Large people also have to be very careful about how loudly they speak. You want to be clearly audible but you don't want to come across like an angry ogre.

Panelists

Let's imagine you are being interviewed by a panel of interviewers instead of by a single person. This is a bit more challenging, because when there is only a single person, you have a much greater chance of retaining their interest. That is not the case with a panel. Keep in mind that a panel may have already seen a hundred candidates and all those people got asked the same basic questions and they returned the same basic answers. Does that sound like fun for an interviewer? Of course, not. The panel interview is not the best situation, both for the interviewers and for the interviewee. The interviewers on panels have time to daydream or doodle that they don't have in a one on one interview, where they are running the show. Consequently, it can be difficult to keep all of the interviewers paying attention to everything you have to say. How do you accomplish this?

First, what you have to say must be interesting. Frame your answers, whenever possible, in a story or narrative form. Most students look at interview questions the way they look at test

questions on an exam – they think that there are right and wrong answers. While it is definitely possible to give ill considered or inappropriate answers, the reality is that interview questions are more like essay questions than they are fill in the blank questions. If you're giving fill in the blank answers to interview questions, you're in trouble. It is important to think of the interview as your chance to tell your story. What people will remember about you are the interesting tidbits you share with them. Remind yourself that the interview is not an oral exam on a bunch of facts but a conversation in which the interviewers are trying to get to know what makes you tick. Narrative answers reveal your thought processes and attitudes, the things that interviewers are interested in. To learn how to do this better, see the sections on "[Thinking on your feet](#)" and the "[Who Are You](#)" statement.

OK, let's assume that despite your best efforts, you notice that one person on the panel is doodling and not really paying attention to you. How do you bring them back into your conversation? There are many ideas for how to do this, but the most subtle is one students rarely hit upon. It is silence. You are likely to feel that silence is your worst enemy. When people get nervous, they sometimes try to avoid silence by filling the air with their voices, whether it is by giving long-winded answers or giggling nervously at the end of their answers (a word to the wise- *don't*). Silence can be unsettling, but that is why it is effective for getting attention and why it is a powerful tool for you to use in this situation. Don't wait for the question to

swing around to the doodler before you try to bring them back into the conversation. Instead, simply stop talking. Put a thoughtful look on your face as if you are thinking hard about a question (remember – look down, not up). What you will see is that everyone will notice when you go silent. The doodler will look at you and when you make eye contact, smile warmly and act like you just grabbed that thought you were pulling out of the air. You've just pulled this person back into the conversation and you can start speaking again.

Difficult questions

You should also be prepared for difficult questions that may deal with ethical issues like end of life care or abortion, that are complex and evoke strong emotions. As a physician, you will need to be able to think about these issues. Your answers to these questions cannot simply be based on your own personal feelings about the issue and should indicate that you are capable of understanding the complexities of such questions. To learn how to do this better, see the section on [Framing the Issue](#).

Multiple Mini-Interviews

A new style of interviewing called MMI (Multiple Mini-Interview) is gaining in popularity and is spreading to many medical schools in the U.S. The format was originated at McMaster University in Canada and spread through the Canadian system

fairly rapidly. MMI is now being adopted by many schools in the U.S. system, as well. Though the format of these interviews is somewhat different than that of traditional interviews, the basic principles we have described apply to all interviews, including MMIs. There are also a few additional considerations for MMIs, as described below.

Schools are moving to MMI to try to better assess the skills that are necessary for success in a medical career. These include thinking on one's feet, problem solving, keeping one's cool, and more. The MMIs permit interviewers to gain insights that might be difficult to obtain in traditional interviews. The MMI format strives to increase the number of interviewers and to pose questions that require students to think more deeply about how to solve problems, much like a physician would do in treating and interacting with a patient.

MMI formats

The format of MMIs is to have interviewees travel between several "stations." Upon arrival at each station, they are presented with a situation and typically given about 2 minutes to ponder the problem. Then, they are expected to answer in about 8 minutes. This means that the questions that come up in an MMI will be deeper in nature than those in a standard interview and will have many dimensions. Categories of questions one might find in an MMI include 1) general ethical dilemmas; 2) complexities of personal interactions; 3) privacy issues; 4) legal issues; 5) economic considerations; 6) personal

responsibility; 7) standard style interview questions; 8) acting (interacting with actors portraying people in a situation); or 9) essay writing. Whew!

How in the world can a student prepare for all of these? Learning to think on one's feet is essential. Going through the framing the issue exercise we provide later in the book ([HERE](#)) will help you to learn to do this. MMI questions will hammer home to you, like no other format, that interviews are not fill in the blank type exams. They require you to think of and consider all of the factors in a complex situation. Let's try one on for size.

"Your father has received a diagnosis of Lou Gehrig's disease and has a likely prognosis of about one year to live. The disease is almost always fatal and quality of life degrades considerably en route to death. Your father lives in Oregon and says he is considering doctor-assisted suicide. He asks you to give him a frank assessment of this path. What do you tell him?"

Answering MMI questions well requires you to be able to frame the issue. This means, first of all, that though you may have opinions, they are not what you lead with. You first need to identify and describe all of the core issues relating to the problem so that it is possible to think clearly and objectively about it. For the problem above, here are some of those issues:

1. You are related to the patient, so this is not a standard doctor-patient relationship. Your relationship with your father

will likely color your response. Impartiality will be more difficult.

2. To qualify for physician assistance under the Death With Dignity Act (that's the name of the Oregon law) a patient is legally required to meet certain criteria. Knowing what the legal constraints are is important. One note – if you are not from, and aren't interviewing in, Oregon, or other states that have similar laws (Washington, for example), then you don't need to know exactly what the law is. On the other hand, if you are from Oregon and/or are interviewing at an Oregon school, you darn sure better read up on the law before your interview.

3. With respect to doctor-assisted suicide, there is an enormous divide between those who believe the physician should never hasten a patient's death (anti doctor-assisted suicide) and those who believe that a physician's job to maintain quality of life may include helping a person to end it on their own terms (pro doctor-assisted suicide). You should, of course, elaborate on these positions more than we are doing here.

4. Though doctor-assisted suicide is ultimately a decision for the patient, assuming all legal requirements are met, there are almost always other people to be considered. Their needs, fears, and perspectives need to be discussed with your father.

5. How do you feel? Your father has asked for a frank assessment. Part of that includes your professional opinion, but since there is a family relationship, you need to let your father know

what your feelings are and how they complicate your being able to give a completely impartial answer to his question.

With these concerns laid out, you could move forward and describe what advice you would give in view of all of these factors. It is most important that your recommendations have a rational, not emotional, basis, and that they take into consideration the issues you have identified. Sometimes, students have a hard time framing the issue because they have strong feelings on the subject and they let their personal view on the matter color their analysis. It is *essential* that you not do this. You must, as fully as possible, describe all perspectives equally and impartially. Being able to take oneself out of the picture is an important skill for a physician to possess.

The last section of the book has [10 MMI-style questions](#) for you to consider.

Ending the interview

Generally, at the end of a session, the interviewers will ask if the interviewee has any questions. It is a good idea to be prepared for this. Do some research before going to the school to find out how things operate, what the plusses and minuses are at the school, and how the school matches up with what you are looking for. Your questions should focus on things about the school or the area that you are unclear about. The one time you can pull out a piece of paper is at the very end, when you are asked if you have any questions. This has

the advantage that you won't forget your questions, but more importantly, it gives those questions added significance. Be sure the questions matter to you and that they are not trivial or trite. That will not look good. You should use your questions as part of what may be thought of as you interviewing the school. It is not, of course, an interview and you should not pretend that it is, but you should be sure to get your questions answered. One to two questions is good. More than that may get old. When the interview is done, take your leave professionally - thank the interviewers crisply - don't linger or mumble. On your way out, be sure to get the names of the interviewers if you have not done so before. It is better to ask the receptionist the name of a person than to ask the person directly. The names will be important for a follow-up thank you note.

Other considerations

Formal interviews typically take up a small fraction of the day students spend visiting a school. Tours are usually provided, along with opportunities to sit in on classes and interact with students and faculty. Even though you are not always sitting in an interview, we recommend that you treat every minute you are at a school as if you were in an actual interview. This means you need to be attentive, thinking, listening, and interacting as appropriate. You won't score many points for doing everything right at lunch, for example, but you sure can lose points for doing something wrong. It is impossible, of course

to anticipate all of the things one might do wrong in an interview, but one general piece of advice is that you should spend a fair amount of time reading about the school as well as the local and state environment of the school. Knowing what the important local issues are can be useful and being ignorant of them can be a disadvantage. These sorts of topics may arise in casual conversation or over lunch and it is why we recommend preparation. Most importantly, you need to be knowledgeable about national and international news, and conversant with all of the major issues in your home state and anything that might involve your school. You do not want someone at a different school to know more about your state than you do.

After the interview

When you arrive back home from your interview (or within 2 days, if you are on the road), you should write a thank you note to the people who interviewed you. You may use simple, professional-looking thank you cards with nothing but the words Thank You on the front and blank inside, for your note (absolutely no pictures or corny Hallmark™ verses). If you use these, hand write your note neatly and legibly. Below your signature, print your full name clearly so they know who you are. Alternatively, you may send a typed letter on regular stationery and sign it. In either case, the note should be brief. It should say how much you enjoyed the opportunity to connect with them and it should thank them, both for the

invitation to visit and for the interviewers' time. It should conclude with a statement that you look forward to hearing again from them. That is about all that should be in the letter. You may send a letter to each person, if you have their names, or you can send one to the committee, if you don't.

The waiting game - part two

By the time you've interviewed, you've probably already gotten tired of the waiting game, but it isn't over yet. Some of the worst of it is still to come. If you're a person who overanalyzes what you do, then this part of the process is going to be tough. Though time frames will vary widely, you can expect, sooner or later, to get an indication of your status – accepted, wait-listed, or rejected. Being wait-listed is, of course, the most nerve-wracking. You will likely be tempted to contact the school if you've been on the waiting list for a while and don't feel they have followed up in a reasonable amount of time. You want to be very careful with that. As already pointed out, you've basically got one “bug the admissions committee secretary” card up your sleeve at this point. If you play it early, you don't have much else to do.

May 15 is when medical schools typically will finalize their decisions and is the date by which you will be expected to finalize your decision if you have not already done so. If it is getting into April and you still have not heard one way or the other from any schools, you may decide that it is time to play your card. Below is a strategy employed by some of our students –

use it at your own risk, after carefully considering the pros and cons. We are not endorsing this strategy, but it has been effective for some.

Making choices

By this point, you will have interviewed at all of your schools and should have a ranking of them in terms of your priorities. You may also have rankings of where you stand in the waiting order for some of the schools. Putting these two pieces of information together may allow you to select one school as your “top choice.” Once this is done, students will sometimes contact that school, saying that it is their top choice and that if they are accepted, they will definitely go there. There is a risk associated with this ploy, so beware, because it is basically a commitment from you to them that you will attend if you are accepted. If a different school accepts you in the meantime, then you will need to wait until your #1 school gives you a yea or nay. This means that even though you have a sure thing in school #2, you have to sit around waiting for school #1 to decide (and there is a chance that they may decide No). Because of this, you may choose not to gamble, and instead, keep your options open. Students play the game because they feel it may give them a leg up with a school and occasionally, it works. We've also seen the anxiety students suffer if they are accepted at a different school before they hear back, so think carefully about what you want to do.



Exercises & Tips

Exercises and Tips

Thinking on your feet

Who are you?

Thanks for the memories

Sounding like an adult

Honesty

Framing the issue

Thinking on your feet

Learning to tell stories requires you to learn to think on your feet. This is because in the interview you will need to be able to think as you are speaking. What follows is an exercise we give to students to help them to learn to think on their feet. It works, but only if you give it sufficient practice. It will take several rounds to get it down, so grab a timer and find your most patient friends and convince them to work with you.

The exercise comes in two parts. The first part teaches the value of association in building a story. In this part, one person gives the other person a single word. The task is to tell a story involving that word for the next 60 seconds. You are not allowed to stop and you cannot repeat yourself. It can be true, made-up, whatever, but you must talk for one minute.

At the end of the minute of telling your story about the word, you must then switch gears and take another minute to tell a different story about the same word *as it relates to medicine*. If you do this exercise enough, you will find you will start thinking ahead to the second story while you are telling the first story. Both parts are important, though.

Let's say your friend gave you the word "Sand". To fill the minute with a story involving sand, you will have to use associations – *"When I think of sand, I am reminded of beaches and vacations. Perhaps the best vacation I remember was the time we went to the beach on Maui when I was 17 and*

for the first time I was able to swim in ocean water that was warm and comfortable. I remember the sand sticking to me when I got out of the water, but I never wanted to leave the water. It was there that I learned for the first time to snorkel and what I saw underwater amazed me” What you see in a story like this is that sand provided an opening to something associated with sand that allowed you to keep talking. The entire story didn’t end up about sand, but it led to something more interesting. The value of this first part of the exercise is that it gives you practice in taking any topic and turning it into an interesting anecdote.

For the second part of the exercise, most students discover that it becomes much easier if they learn to think metaphorically, rather than literally. *“Sand makes me think of soil and the many wonderful and sometimes dangerous things that arise from within it. We depend on soil for our food and energy, but soil also has toxins and deadly microbes. I am reminded of the phrase, “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” when I think of the soil. Our lives depend on it. We may die from it and be buried in it. As a physician, I see myself as managing that progression. Like the sands of the beach constantly created and washed by the ocean’s waves, I see physicians renewing and extending the lives of their patients. My patients will be molded not by the oceans, but by my efforts at education, treatment, and guidance. I want to be like a healing ocean to my patients.”*

While this might not win any prizes for profundity, thinking metaphorically will help you, especially when you are stuck. Many students, especially those who haven’t read widely or had much exposure to the humanities or creative writing, will be too literal-minded when attempting this exercise and get frustrated with it. It is important, especially for these people, to work harder on the exercise. You don’t want to get in the interview and be boring. Although you won’t have someone in your interview give you a word and expect you to hold forth on how it relates to medicine, there will be situations where you need to be able to take a prompt and talk intelligently about it. This exercise will help you learn how to think quickly, make non-obvious connections and respond to anything that is thrown your way.

Who are you?

In Kevin’s interview class, this activity is done on the second day of class. It is called “Who Are You?” and it requires students to spend two minutes (maximum) standing in front of a video camera telling their story. They are instructed to be creative in their presentation and each student’s aim is to convince listeners that s/he is right for medical school and will be a great physician. Students generally struggle with this task, sometimes seeking a formula for a successful presentation. Why is it so hard? It’s partly because they have been in student mode for most of their lives. They are accustomed to every exam and every assignment being based on things the professor has

already told them. It is very natural, then, to think that every question you are asked in class has an answer provided by the professor. The “Who Are You?” question is not like that, and for good reason. There is no way the professor can know *your* story. Only you can answer the question, “who are you?”

The story in question is that of your life, or more likely, an event in your life that reveals you as right for medicine (and *vice versa*). Creativity in telling your story is key for the “Who Are You?” just like it was for the personal statement. In a traditional interview, the first question you will almost always be asked is “Why do you want to be a doctor?” or “Why do you think you will be a good doctor?” or, “What brings you to medicine?” In reality, the answer to each of these questions is the same as the answer to the “Who Are You?” They are each asking you to define yourself and they give you a great opportunity to make your case. There are a lot of things to think about in a good “Who Are You?” so we are going to spend some time going through these below.

1. Everyone applying to medical school wants to be a doctor because s/he cares about people. You do not need to say this, even though almost everyone will feel compelled to do so. (To understand why this statement is silly and unnecessary, try to imagine someone saying “I want to be a doctor because I couldn’t care less about people”.) Instead, tell a story that is so vivid and easy to understand that anyone hearing it will be able to see how much you care about people without your using those words.

2. Your story should paint a picture of you. What is it that makes you, you? We are the products of genetics and our environment. We can’t control our genetics or describe them in an interview. The environment that gave rise to you, however, is what this is about. What are the experiences that have shaped you? How can you best describe them?

3. At this point you will be very tempted to squeeze as many things into your “story” as possible. You may have been President of your high school, treasurer of your sorority, a volunteer at 10 different soup kitchens, a leader in the campus blood drive, etc, etc, etc. And, you know what? You do not want to tell them all this. You are not a list of things you have done. You are telling your story or stories. Stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end and they lead listeners to a conclusion – in this case you want them to conclude that you have what it takes to be a physician. You have two minutes for your Who Are You. This will give you time for one, or maybe, two stories.

4. Your story should have sufficient detail to be understood and be interesting, but it should not dwell on any one thing. Yes, your grandmother’s death was extremely upsetting for you, but if you spend the entire time talking about that, then it suggests that you have not had much adult experience (very bad – see below) or that you may have a problem dealing with death (also not good). You are a multi-dimensional person, so your story should bring out these dimensions. It should spur the listener to want to learn more. You don’t have to go into every gory detail. However, a few choice details are good for

giving people something to remember about you, especially if it leads them to ask more questions about it.

5. Going on longer than two minutes for most questions runs the risk of boring people or giving the impression that you don't know when to shut up.

6. If you are going to successfully keep all these important points in mind, you *must* practice your "Who Are You?" answer. You *must* time it. But, you need to remind yourself that the reason you are practicing is to ensure that you present all your main points and don't take too long over it. You are not memorizing something to mechanically recite by heart. The more rehearsed your answer sounds, the less seriously it will be taken. How do the interviewers know, for example, that you didn't hire someone to write something that you then memorized? Practice your "Who Are You?" so that you can be articulate and succinct, but remember that it must not look in any way, shape, or form like it is memorized.

Thanks for the memories

What are the telltale cues that suggest that something has been memorized? Well, one sign is looking upward when you're thinking. We've said it before, and we'll say it again – *don't* do it. Also, memorized speeches have no natural rhythm to them – they are often delivered without inflection and at a faster than normal pace. Natural speech has pauses. It may even have places where you have to scramble to find the right

word. Think about the hand gestures and facial expressions you would have if you were telling your friends a story in a pub. That is your natural style. You don't want to look robotic. Have a smile on your face, unless you are talking about a serious matter, in which case your expression should reflect the appropriate emotion.

Sounding like an adult

You may have no idea how old you sound to someone older than you. Here is a test Kevin gives students in his interview class that reveals to them how their words can make them sound childlike. They almost always fail it. When they realize it, they are aghast. It is a very simple test. Here is how it goes.

Students are first warned that they are going to sound younger than they think and that they must be very careful in answering the question. The question? "Tell me about your family."

This one question is extraordinarily revealing. Here is an example of what over 95% of students will say – "*Well, I have a mother and a father, two sisters, and a brother. My grandmothers are both alive, but my grandfathers have passed away.*"

There are, obviously, variations on the details of this, but they all have a common theme – the student is defining himself/herself as a child – the child of his/her parents. While it is, no doubt, true that everyone is the child of their parents, the family that students are describing is one *their parents made*. A

family is something that adults make. To an adult, the words “your family” means the one you created with your partner, not the one you were born into. The family you were born into is the family your parents created. You are a part of their family, but when you are an adult, you create your own. “When I was a child, I walked and talked as a child, but when I became an adult . . .” You get the idea. The few students who answer this like adults on the first try are generally married and have children or actually see themselves as adults and describe themselves as such.

Honesty

At this point, many students will look puzzled and ask how they should answer the question (because, as college students, most of them have not started a family of their own). Really, it’s very simple. In answering questions, honesty is *always* the best policy. If someone asks you to describe your family, there are two possibilities. Either you have no family of your own or you have a family of your own. If you have none, then simply say that you don’t have a family, yet. If you have one, then describe it. Simple. A similar exercise can be done with the question “Where is your home?” Most students will describe where their parents’ home is. Home is where you make it, if you are an adult.

This brings up some important points. The more you talk about your parents in your interview, the more you remind people of you as a child. That isn’t to say that your parents cannot

be in your statement or interview, but if you mention them, it must be for very important reasons. Second, get out of the habit of talking about “my family” if you mean your parents’ family. Again, if you don’t have kids and/or a significant other, it’s not *your* family.

Last, the fewer stories you tell about growing up, the better, unless they are very insightful. Your “growing up” years are best compressed into the college years. Talking about when you were eight years old or telling about something from high school really isn’t the way to communicate that you are an adult.

Framing the issue

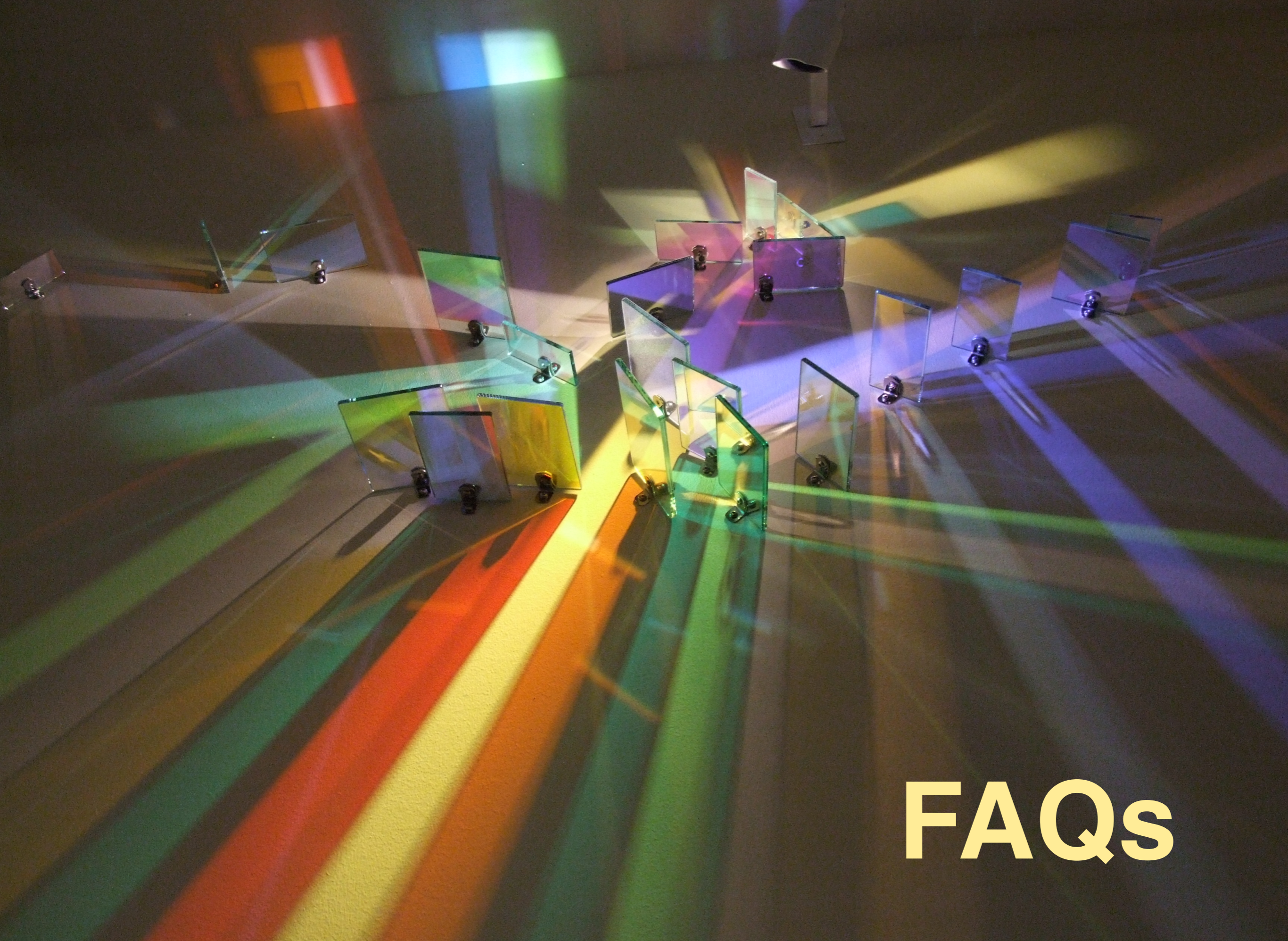
A very important principle to learn in answering questions is what we call “Framing the Issue”. This technique is useful anytime you have a complicated situation that has many aspects. The principle of framing the issue is useful both in traditional interview and MMI style formats. It is particularly useful in MMIs, because these interviews often feature questions that don’t have simple answers. In framing issues, the student identifies and describes the major concerns and perspectives that must be considered in order to arrive at an answer. If you do a good job, it shows that you are aware of, and take into consideration, the different viewpoints on the subject. It also demonstrates that you have an understanding of complexity and nuance, which is particularly important when the question is on a controversial topic. This may seem

contrary to your natural instinct. Let's try an example. Imagine you have just been asked, "What do you think about abortion?"

Wow. Now there's a big one. As you know, the polarization of opinion on this question is intense. You may well have strong views, yourself, on this topic. Your instinct probably tells you to answer the question as asked – that since they've asked your opinion, you should give your opinion. Before you give your opinion, though, you need to set the stage for it. Because you are an intelligent person, your opinion doesn't come out of nowhere (one hopes). It should be based on the thoughtful consideration of many perspectives. This is the groundwork you need to lay. It is important, in doing this, that you describe the entire picture, not just those parts that led you to your opinion or that are consistent with your position. You need to give an account, as impartially as you can, of the views of the people who oppose abortion and of those who want abortion to be an option. It is important that you do this as calmly and as thoroughly as you can. For big questions like this, the two minute rule can be bent somewhat. If you were asked this question in an MMI, for example, you would have several minutes to answer it. After you have laid out the different perspectives clearly and completely, you should explain your own views on the matter and how you arrived at them.

If you use this approach, you will come across as thoughtful, reasonable and objective, rather than simply opinionated and biased. That said, it is important to know when to frame an

issue. Questions about you, for example, should be answered directly. If you try the "on the one hand...on the other hand" approach for those questions, you will seem evasive or unable to get to the point.



FAQs

FAQs

[How should I dress for my interview?](#)

[What if it rains?](#)

[Can I carry notes or a piece of paper?](#)

[Should I tell interviewers that their school is my number one choice?](#)

[Should I make a joke in my interview?](#)

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[Is it OK to take 5 years to graduate?](#)

How should I dress for my interview?

You should dress to respect the occasion. This means business clothing.

For men - dark suit and a tie (keep to the conservative side with the tie). Dark socks and shoes that are appropriate with a suit, naturally.

For women - You may wear a skirt-suit or dress with a jacket if you wish, but it is not required. If you are petite, you might want to *avoid* skirt-suits or dresses – they tend to make people see you as younger and more “girly.” A pant-suit is fine and depending on the timing of the interview (many are in winter) may be the most comfortable option. Your clothes should not distract you (or the interviewers – this is a professional setting, not a date). If you are cold and uncomfortable, you won’t be able to concentrate on your interview. Pick your shoes carefully – if you wear heels, make sure you can be comfortable in them all day. You want to feel (and look) confident and relaxed.

Students sometimes make the mistake of over-dressing. Yes, this is an important interview and yes, you want to look nice, but don’t blow the budget because you think it will give you a leg up. It won’t. Your interviewers are more interested in who you are than in what you are wearing. Your clothes should not be the main attraction. Overdressing says that your appearance is the most important thing about you.

Your dress also tells interviewers a bit about how well you fit in. For example, if you go to an interview in Florida in an outfit that is heavy, you are saying that you don't really understand Florida weather. Similarly, in the rainy Northwest, carrying an umbrella might seem to be a requirement to outsiders, but in reality, many Northwest natives wear hooded raincoats and don't carry umbrellas. Remember that your aim is to show how you can fit in.

Another important guideline is to dress to make you look *older* than you are, unless you happen to be 27+. Again, women tend to have more options than men, particularly with regards to their hair and makeup. Glasses can help both men and women look older.

What if it rains?

This is a common concern. First of all, you should be prepared to have something to keep yourself dry. This may be an umbrella or an overcoat of some sort. You do not want to be unprepared for the weather. The place you are interviewing will have a place for you to leave coats and umbrellas.

Can I carry notes or a piece of paper?

No, no, no, with one exception. The message you convey by carrying notes is that you are not prepared, that you can't think on your feet, and that you need help. All bad. You also do not want to whip out a piece of paper and write notes during the

interview. This says you can't keep things straight in your head. Not good. The only exception to this rule is that it is OK to have one piece of paper in your pocket with the following things on it – questions you have for the interviewers about the school. At the end of an interview the interviewers will ask if you have any questions about the school. You can say that you do and that they were important, so you wrote them down to be sure you didn't forget them. This says you did some research and that you are so interested in their school that you want to be sure to get your questions answered.

Should I tell interviewers that their school is my number one choice?

No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Is this emphatic enough? This is a bad idea with a capital B. If you do this what you have just done is told the school that: 1) I am lying and manipulative; or 2) I am naïve, or 3) you may now put me at the end of the notification list, because I will wait until the very end, just so I can come here. Students think saying that a school is their number one choice will give them an advantage. While it might, in the right circumstances, the wrong time to say it is during an interview.

You need to think of your interview as a two-way street. They are interviewing you, but so, too, should you be interviewing the school. You need to be examining it critically. How are you being treated? How do you like the facilities? Are your

questions getting answered? etc. This is something you should be doing at every school you visit. If you think you can identify your number one school without checking out every school you visit, you are, shall we say, acting like a kid, not a person serious about a career in medicine. *After* you have had all of your interviews and *after* you have had your offers and *after* you have weighed all of the factors, then you can *prioritize* these factors into ratings and then make an informed decision. Announcing your decision before you are in a position to make it is a hallmark of immaturity.

Should I make a joke in my interview?

You don't want to be a clown, but making an appropriate joke about the interview can ease tensions and make you seem more approachable. This may be particularly advantageous for you if you tend to come across as intimidating or too serious. Don't make more than one such comment and be careful to gauge the situation and the individuals you are dealing with before using humor. Don't use humor unless you are the sort of person to whom this comes naturally – you don't want to sound artificial or strained.

What if a questioner gets in my face with at the interview?

Fortunately, this doesn't happen very often. There are three reasons interviewers may do this. First, they may be on a

power trip. Second, they may have sensed something less than concrete or honest in one of your responses and they seek to expose it. Third (and most likely), they sense weakness on your part and that you can be pushed around. You can't do anything about an interviewer on a power trip. The second situation is one you can avoid by only speaking out on things of which you have knowledge and by being 100% honest. In the case of the third scenario, if they are pushing you, your response to that pushing tells them volumes about you. Yes, you are in a weak position compared to the interviewer, but if you back away, what you are signaling is that you can be pushed around and that will likely disqualify you. Stand your ground. Do not let an interviewer put words in your mouth. Don't, under any circumstances, get angry or lose your cool. You simply need to be firm. Every student we have ever known who has been pushed around and who also stood their ground, came out of the interview feeling awful and certain they had no chance at that school - and every such student also got in at that same school. This tells you that your reaction to your interview isn't always an accurate assessment of how the committee thinks you did.

Is it OK to take 5 years to graduate?

Absolutely. We are big advocates of waiting to apply and believe many young people apply to medical school too soon. The average age of admission to medical school is about 26 and with good reason. By that age, students have grown up a

bit, seen the world, and experienced life. A fifth year is a great step in that process. We've never known anyone to have problems or regrets for taking five years to graduate. We think everyone benefits by taking an extra year or two before applying. You'll not only be better prepared for medical school if you do this, you'll also likely increase your chances of acceptance, so long as you keep active in medicine during that time.



*Please mind
your head*

Sample Questions

Sample Questions

Standard questions

MMI type questions

Standard questions

Below we have compiled a series of important questions that you should be able to answer. You should, of course, answer questions in your own way, but we are providing some ideas that may help you to think about the questions more deeply.

1. **Who are you?** This question may be asked in several forms, such as “Why do you want to be a doctor?” or “Why do you think medicine is right for you?” or “Why should we take you into our program?” or even “Tell me about yourself.” This question has been discussed at length earlier. Take the time to think about your own answer – if you don’t know who you are, you’re not going to be able to explain yourself to anyone else.
2. **Rank practicality and idealism in your life.** Our day-to-day lives demand practicality but we are guided by our ideals. This question is intended to gauge an interviewee’s ability to balance these things in going through life. People who are idealistic are often more likable, but accomplishing things in the world also calls for practicality. Too much pragmatism is uninspiring. Too much idealism can make a person unrealistic about what can be accomplished.
3. **What’s the hardest thing you’ve ever done?** After the “Who Are You” this is the most important question that

students should be able to answer without hesitation. We recommend to students that they prepare and practice an answer to this question. This question seeks, first, to gauge whether the interviewee has had the experiences of an adult life – earning one’s own living, dealing with death or serious illness, economic hardship, overcoming major obstacles, being married, having kids, etc. The reason for preparing and practicing the answer to this is that, sometimes, the hardest thing you have dealt with can be an experience you have buried away. In the stress of an interview, you may not be able to come up with it. You don’t want to be in the interview talking about the time when you worked and worked and worked to pull your biochemistry grade up from a B to an A-. That is *not* what adults would consider a major life challenge. Students frequently ask what to say if they’ve had “no adult experiences.” Anyone who asks this question probably needs to have more experience of life before applying to medical school, but regardless, being honest, as always, is the best. Don’t try to tell the interviewer that you’ve had hard times if you really haven’t. If you haven’t had any real challenges in your life, think about how you have used that advantage to be a better person/student/professional.

4. **What do you do for fun?** This is one of those innocuous, generic questions that is asked for one of two reasons. First, the interviewer may simply be making conversation. Second,

the interviewer may sense that you are nervous and is trying to put you at ease. Hearing this question should put a smile on your face, if nothing else does. Use it to help relax you so you can shine on your interview.

5. **What do you think will be the greatest challenge about being a doctor?** Your answer to this question says a lot about how you see the profession of medicine. Even though you chose medicine because of its many appealing aspects, there are, of course many things about being a physician that will be difficult. If you haven’t thought about them, you don’t have a realistic view of the profession. Whatever those difficulties might be, think about how you face challenges in your life and how that may help you to address the many challenges doctors encounter.

6. **What is your worst quality and your best quality?** This question causes students a lot of consternation, at least the first part of it. The second is trivial, but we caution students to think about qualities that are relevant to the practice of medicine. You may need to work a lot on the first part of the question. Learning how to describe your worst quality properly is important. Most people make a big mistake with this answer.

Let’s say you think your worst quality is that you take on too many things. If you simply say that you try to do too many things, without any further clarification, then you leave the

questioner free to imagine all kinds of awful scenarios – perhaps, you might create life-threatening situations through your inability to complete all the things you take on? When you answer the question about your worst quality, you must clearly define what that entails. Perhaps, because you take on too many things, you have less personal time. That’s a heck of a lot less worrying than taking on so many things that someone’s life is placed at risk.

Oftentimes, students will want to “sugar coat” the worst quality, trying to convince the questioner that a bad quality is really a good one. It is possible to do this, in some cases, but if your argument is not convincing, you run the risk of setting off the interviewers’ BS detectors – never a good thing, because once that happens, everything else you say will be colored by that impression.

7. If you could change something about medicine, what would it be? A good question that allows you to analyze the practice of medicine, but you must be careful in how you do this. You want to come across as knowledgeable, but if you talk about things that you are not an expert on, you run the risk of being called on your answer by someone who actually is an expert. Answer this question, being careful to stay within the bounds of your knowledge, and be honest. You can certainly speak with confidence on topics you have researched and can discuss intelligently.

8. What was the biggest news item you read about in the past week? This question is here to remind students that they *must* read, read, read. Watching TV just doesn’t cut it. If we were to ask this question of a student, we could pretty quickly tell the extent of their knowledge about the topic they pick by asking follow-up questions. Students need to realize that professionals read the news a *lot* more than most students do. If you want to do yourself a favor, start reading the newspaper (preferably a major regional or national daily, not your campus student paper) in depth, beginning at least a year before you apply. If you don’t know much about what is happening in the world, your interviewers will have a hard time seeing you as an adult, let alone as a physician.

9. What are your ideals? This question is often misunderstood by students. When they hear the word “ideal”, they think it is an adjective that means the “best of all possibilities”. A student once said that his ideals were having so much money and free time that he could do anything he wanted. This is a bad response on a couple of accounts. First, you should *never* mention money in an interview, unless you are directly asked about it. If you bring up money when you haven’t been asked about it, the interviewer will get the impression that you are going into medicine for the money. Second, this student clearly did not realize that *ideals*, as used in the question, is a noun, and refers to the principles that you hold dear, or characteristics that you value

and work to achieve (like liberty, equality or universal education, as well as traits like integrity, rationality, compassion, independence, loyalty, etc.)

- 10. Are you a leader or a follower?** Most students like to think of themselves as leaders and many, in fact, are very good leaders. They will often answer this question by declaring themselves to be leaders. In reality, you need to know when to lead (when you have the expertise, vision and ability to succeed) and when to follow (when someone else is better positioned). Remember that in surgery, for example, while there is a surgical team, there is one leader, not six people fighting over a scalpel. Sometimes, you may be the best person to be the leader and at other times, you need to defer to another physician. This question makes students think about what their roles are in the healthcare system and when it may be important to refer a patient on to a specialist.
- 11. What is your position on doctor-assisted suicide?** This is an example of the type of question common to MMIs. This question is almost always approached incorrectly by students. On the surface, it seems like a fill in the blank question. The question asks for your position on a controversial topic, so the logical thing would seem to state your position. While you should, indeed, indicate your position and answer the question, it should *not* be the first thing out

of your mouth. Instead, you should use the principle of “[framing the issue](#)” to set the groundwork for your answer, before you get into your personal take on the matter. Doing so will highlight your knowledge of the issue and demonstrate that you see that controversial topics have more than one important perspective.

- 12. Give me an example of you in a role of leadership.** This is a pretty general question that is mostly information gathering. The aim of this question is to find out how you interact with people and how others see you. Having some meaningful leadership experience (e.g., in student government, as an officer in a student club or leader in a service organization) to talk about would be helpful.
- 13. Give me an example of you being out of control.** This question aims to get a sense of the range of life experiences you have had, as well as your personality. Did you get yourself into a pickle? How did you adapt to being out of control? How much is being in control important to you?
- 14. You have a PTA meeting your spouse says you cannot miss. An emergency arises in your office that requires your attention and will prevent you from going to the meeting. What do you do?** This one is a gimme – it’s actually one of the easiest questions to answer. Physicians have to prioritize. If there is one word you want to get into your interview, it is the word ‘prioritize’. Here is a conflict.

At first sight it appears that an immovable object has met an irresistible force. How is this to be resolved?

Students will sometimes look at questions like these and try to find “technical” ways around them – “Maybe I would deal with the office problem real quick and then go to the PTA meeting.” Well, if that was a realistic option, why would anyone ask this question? Weaseling out on questions like this is not a good idea. Further, do not go back to the interviewer with additional questions, unless clarity is needed. Questions like this require that you assign priorities to conflicting demands and act accordingly. You must do that in answering this question. Another advantage of not asking for more information is that you can use what you have been given as you see fit. That may help you in coming up with an answer.

15. **What does the word “professional” mean to you?** This one is critical. To students, the word “expertise” most frequently comes up. They see professionals as people who have expertise in a specialty. While this is true, professionalism (the practice of being professional) has more to it. Medical professionals have the best interests of the patient at heart – above those of the physician. Professionals know their limits and do not try to go beyond them. Professionals provide a constant, high level of performance, irrespective of how long they have been

working, how difficult a particular day has been, or how stressful situations external to the workplace may be. Professionals seek the truth and act with honesty. Professionals hold themselves to the highest possible ethical standards and expect the same of their peers. Professionals have strength of character and do not allow themselves to be pushed around or intimidated.

MMI Type Questions

Here are ten MMI-type questions for you to consider. For each of these questions, framing the issue is critical for answering it. We recommend you start first with identifying all of the issues inherent in the question. Your analysis should include the items that are in conflict in the question *en route* to what you will do. What you will do in a situation may depend on the different angles you develop during your discussion, but be careful not to sound wishy-washy if you do this. (See also the section on [framing the issue](#))

1. The 17 year-old daughter of a family friend confesses to you that she is pregnant and her parents not only have no knowledge of it, she fears the consequences of their learning of her pregnancy. She is torn between having an abortion, telling her parents, or trying to marry her boyfriend. What do you do?
2. You discover that a patient you know to be HIV-positive is dating an acquaintance of yours. You have strong reason to

believe that the acquaintance has no idea of the HIV status of your patient. What do you do?

3. You discover that a narcotics cabinet under your control has medications missing from it. How do you proceed, from the point of discovery to complete resolution of the matter?

4. A patient of yours has had a hard life and has just retired. To celebrate, he has purchased a dream vacation to travel the world. In a routine physical, a week before the vacation is to start, you discover anomalies in his blood tests that suggest he may have only a short period of time to live. What do you do?

5. A patient is in for a checkup and you suspect an issue involving cancer. In the absence of other evidence, the patient's insurance company will not cover the necessary expensive tests, but you need the results of these tests to plot a path for the patient. Time is of the essence. You can get the tests covered by insurance, however, if you cite another condition you know the patient doesn't have. What do you do?

6. You have a patient at the end of life. The family is determined to keep the patient alive as long as they can. You observe that the patient is in pain and states that she wants to die. What do you do?

7. You have a patient with head trauma from a motorcycle accident. He is brain dead. You do a tissue match and

discover organs that could be transplanted, particularly a heart that is badly needed. It is not clear that the patient wished to be an organ donor and the family is divided. Time is of the essence. What do you do?

8. You discover that a member of your staff who has close contact with patients is taking drugs prescribed for HIV patients. The staff member has made no mention about being HIV positive. What do you do?

9. As a result of a blood test, you discover that your terminally ill patient has HIV. The HIV will certainly shorten the patient's already shortened life, but you fear the news will be very traumatic to them. What do you do?

10. You are working in the emergency room and a child badly needs a blood transfusion to survive. As you are getting it ready, you learn that the parents are religious fundamentalists who have previously gone to court to stop medical treatments on their children. What do you do?



Final Thoughts

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We hope you have found the advice in our book helpful and informative. This is the second book we have written together. The first, called [Biochemistry Free and Easy](#) is a free publication that was released online in August, 2012. It is approaching 25,000 downloads from around the world as this book goes to press. Below are a few more URLs you may find of interest.

Kevin also has a lot of online resources available to students for free. They include over 300 YouTube video lectures about biochemistry, free biochemistry courses on iTunes U, Metabolic Melodies, and the Limerick Page. All of these can be accessed through the URL below labeled “Kevin’s Guides.” If you are looking for an ecampus course on biochemistry, there are four of them you can sign up for on the Kevin’s Guides page, as well.

iTunes U

This book is used in the free iTunes U mini-course entitled “***Kevin and Indira’s Guide to Getting Into Medical School***” To access this course, you will need an iOS device (iPhone or iPad). The URL to access is

<https://itunesu.itunes.apple.com/enroll/E7T-R3T-E3B>

URLs of interest

- A. AAMC - <https://www.aamc.org>
- B. AACOMAS - <https://aacomas.aacom.org>
- C. AMA - <http://www.ama-assn.org>
- D. AOA - <http://www.osteopathic.org/Pages/default.aspx>
- E. Student Doctor Network - <http://studentdoctor.net>
- F. Medaholic - <http://www.medaholic.com>
- G. Kevin's Guides -
<http://oregonstate.edu/dept/biochem/ahern/123.html>
- H. Kevin and Indira's "**Biochemistry Free and Easy**" (free biochemistry textbook) -
<http://biochem.science.oregonstate.edu/biochemistry-free-and-easy>
- I. Kevin and Indira's Guide to Getting Into Medical School on iTunes U - <https://itunes.apple.com/us/course/id595023397>
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We welcome your feedback. Please send comments to Kevin and Indira at

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