

THE MEDICAL SCHOOL INTERVIEW

**WINNING STRATEGIES FROM
ADMISSIONS FACULTY**

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RAJANI KATTA MD**

FROM THE AUTHORS OF SUCCESS IN MEDICAL SCHOOL

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Samir P. Desai, M.D.

Dr. Samir Desai serves on the faculty of the Baylor College of Medicine in the Department of Medicine where he is actively involved in medical student and resident education. He is a member of the Clerkship Directors in Internal Medicine, and the recipient of multiple teaching awards. He is an author and editor, having written fourteen books that together have sold over 150,000 copies worldwide.

His book *Success in Medical School: Insider Advice for the Preclinical Years* provides preclinical students with detailed knowledge and guidance to excel and position themselves for match success later in medical school. In 2009, he co-authored *The Successful Match: 200 Rules to Succeed in the Residency Match*, a well-regarded and highly acclaimed book that has helped thousands of residency applicants match successfully. He is also the co-author of *Success on the Wards: 250 Rules for Clerkship Success*. This book has helped thousands of medical students make the difficult transition from the preclinical to clinical years of medical school. *Success on the Wards* is a required or recommended resource at many U.S. medical schools, providing proven strategies for success in patient care, write-ups, rounds, and other vital areas.

As a faculty member, he serves on the medical school admissions and residency selection committees. His commitment to helping premedical and medical students reach their professional goals led him to develop the website TheSuccessfulMatch.com. The website's mission is to provide medical school and residency applicants with a better understanding of the selection process. Dr. Desai keeps applicants abreast of key information at [The Successful Match blog](http://TheSuccessfulMatch.blog). (www.TheSuccessfulMatch.blogspot.com).

After completing his residency training in Internal Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago, Dr. Desai had the opportunity to serve as chief medical resident. He received his M.D. degree from Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit, Michigan, graduating first in his class.

Rajani Katta, M.D.

Dr. Rajani Katta is Professor in the Department of Dermatology at Baylor College of Medicine. She has authored over 50 scientific articles and chapters, and lectured extensively both nationally and locally on dermatology and contact dermatitis to students, residents, and physicians. She serves as the course director for dermatology in the basic science years, and has served as the clerkship director for the dermatology rotation. In these capacities, she has seen firsthand the importance of outstanding clinical evaluations in securing a position in a competitive specialty, and her insight in this area has helped students seeking these types of competitive positions.

Having advised many students over the years regarding the dermatology match process, she was determined to become expert in this area and share her knowledge, insight, and perspective. In 2009, she co-authored *The Successful Match: 200 Rules to Succeed in the Residency Match*. This book has quickly become the best-selling title in this field.

She is also the co-author of *Success on the Wards: 250 Rules for Clerkship Success*. This book has helped thousands of medical students make the difficult transition from the preclinical to clinical years of medical school. *Success on the Wards* is a required or recommended resource at many U.S. medical schools, providing proven strategies for success in patient care, write-ups, rounds, and other vital areas.

After graduating with honors from Baylor College of Medicine and completing her internship in Internal Medicine, she completed her dermatology residency at the Northwestern University School of Medicine.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Why do you want to be a doctor? Why did you choose to apply to our medical school?

Many interviewers will ask variations of these basic, standard questions. And many applicants will have prepared answers for these. Many applicants, though, will get it wrong.

We've interviewed hundreds of applicants. Some we've grilled and some we've coached. And from these hundreds of applicants, we've learned one thing: almost every single one could have been better.

Write down your own answers to these questions, and then take a look at our approach.

Why our school?

You may be asked a number of variations of this same question:

- What qualities are you looking for in a school?
- Describe your ideal medical school.
- What interests you most about our school?
- Tell me what you know about our school.
- Why do you want to be a student here?
- What two or three things are important to you in a medical school?

While the question asks about the school, the best answers highlight the applicant. You need to make a strong case that **YOU** are the perfect fit for this exact school. Few applicants are able to do that well.

Here are examples of the typical responses that we've heard over the years:

“Well, I’ve lived here for three years so I know that I would want to live here. One of the things I like is the diversity and clinical opportunities you offer. I know I would see all kinds of different patient populations. The school has a good reputation which I know would help me get into a good residency program. The atmosphere is excellent, students help each other, and this is a place which will challenge me but not bring out the worst in me.”

“I’m really looking for two things. First, a program that really integrates the clinical with the basic sciences. My impression is that [your school] does a good job with that. The second thing is the breadth of opportunities here. All the research that’s going on. I can’t imagine that it would be difficult to find many people I would be interested in working with.”

“It seems like the school will help you reach your goals. You also have a lot of hospitals you can work at. Also, I’m interested in the International Health Track.”

“I’ll get a great education here. There are so many research opportunities. And students really seem to love the school. Also, the faculty is very involved with the students. Also having all the affiliated hospitals that you have here.”

“The shorter basic science period really appeals to me. So does the way the basic science is structured, for example the way anatomy is spread over a number of semesters. I really like the medical center and Houston. The center is top notch.”

What do all of these responses have in common? They're all underwhelming. While there a number of reasons for this, the main one

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is that all of these applicants end up sounding pretty generic. The responses are fine and nobody's sending up any red flags, but at the same time you'd be hard pressed to remember any of these applicants.

Why is that? First, most of these responses are too brief. Second, most of these responses lack specific details about the school, and all of them lack specific details about the applicant. Third, there's very little here that would convince the interviewer that this specific applicant would be a perfect fit with the school. And finally, there's nothing memorable in any of these responses. In other words, just about any applicant could have given the same response.

The biggest fail here is that every single applicant lost out on a valuable opportunity to impress the interviewer.

To see how a student could answer this question in a more compelling manner, let's meet Elena, an undergraduate student in Arkansas.

Elena's story

Elena grew up in a medically underserved area with a significant Latino population. There were relatively few primary care physicians in her community, and even fewer specialists. Several of Elena's relatives passed away of cancer, and Elena developed an early interest in oncology. After finishing medical school, Elena hopes to pursue residency training in internal medicine followed by fellowship training in oncology. She plans to return to her hometown to practice oncology, and would be one of only two oncologists serving a four-county area. In college, Elena worked with Dr. Garcia, a dermatology faculty member at a local medical school, to develop an instructional module to help primary care physicians differentiate benign from cancerous skin lesions. The main goal was to provide a resource for primary care physicians practicing in parts of the state lacking access to dermatologists. Elena was also involved in organizing and implementing skin cancer screenings in these underserved areas.

Elena's answer

"I first heard about your school from my faculty mentor, Dr. Garcia. Your school has an excellent reputation, and she spoke very highly of the education you offer. You're also well known for quality of teaching and diversity of patients, which I value. I also would love to live in Dallas, and have family in the Fort Worth area."

Analyzing Elena's answer

Be as specific as possible to confirm that your selection of their school was based on some thought and effort. Too often, applicants give a general answer. If you could give the exact same answer at another school, then your answer isn't good enough. If you examine Elena's response, you'll see that her answer, for the most part, was short on specifics. A better response is shown below.

Begin by researching the school thoroughly. What makes this school unique? What aspects of the school or its curriculum do you find particularly compelling? This information allows you to tailor your responses. In simple terms, if the school highly values research, and you have an interest or experience in that area, then you need to discuss it.

If a faculty member recommended the program, then by all means say so, as Elena did. Schools like to know that they're well regarded. Speaking with someone who has firsthand knowledge of the school also demonstrates that you've taken the time and initiative to learn as much as you can about the school. It demonstrates the seriousness of your interest.

There are also certain responses that you need to avoid at all costs. Avoid answers that confirm a disconnect between what you're seeking and what the school offers. Never put down another school. Lastly, while the geographic location of the school may be a major factor in your interest, avoid offering location as the only or initial reason for applying to the school.

A better answer

"I first learned about your school through my faculty mentor. Dr. Garcia is a graduate of your school and she's always spoken highly of the training she received. I would love to be a medical student at your school for a number of reasons. In shadowing physicians, I've learned that it's important to go to a school that places an emphasis on clinical skills. Your school has a reputation for being a leader in clinical skills development. The early patient contact, frequent observation of skills followed by regular feedback, and simulation lab are particularly appealing to me. It's also important to me that I develop a strong foundation for the practice of high quality care with patient safety in mind. That's why I'm really excited about your unique patient safety curriculum. And finally, I know that your school has a track for the underserved, and I could really see myself thriving in this track. In college, some of my most rewarding experiences occurred when I was

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involved in organizing and implementing health fairs for rural communities. Receiving education in caring for an underserved population would be fantastic because I would like to make this an important part of my future career in medicine. I grew up in a medically underserved area, and would like to return to my hometown as an internist and oncologist. On a personal note, I do have family in the Forth Worth area, and training in Dallas would allow me to spend time with family.”

In the following pages, you’ll learn how to create this type of response.

A response that is very memorable. A response that confirms that you have the qualities that this medical school seeks. The type of response that confirms to the interviewer that you are the perfect fit for their medical school. The type of response that so impresses the interviewer that they become your advocate in committee meetings.

In the next 200+ pages, we’ll review, in depth, the medical school interview. You’ll learn how critical the interview is in the admissions process. The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) evaluated the importance of 12 variables on admissions decisions. Of these, the MCAT score was rated sixth. Cumulative science and math GPA was rated third.

The most important factor in admissions decisions was, in fact, the interview.

You’ll learn why the interview is so important to admissions officers. It’s widely recognized that the best physicians have more than just great scores and grades. The most effective physicians display a number of non-academic attributes. These traits are difficult to evaluate, and admissions officers rely on the interview to help assess these traits. In Chapter 3 we present the results of a survey of admissions officers that focuses on traits that are valued in future physicians. Over 20 traits are ranked, including such items as motivation for a medical career, empathy, personal maturity, service orientation, and leadership.

Research has also identified qualities that may hurt your chances for admission. Some of these qualities can be surprisingly easy to display in the high-pressure setting of an interview. It’s easy to predict that schools don’t seek out blunt or uninhibited applicants, but even traits such as self-critical or apologizing can hurt your chances.

You'll learn how to research the medical school, and how to determine the type of student that the school seeks. With an analysis of your own strengths and skills, you can begin to tailor your responses. Chapter 9 reviews the typical interview questions, and provides examples of other students' thoughtful, tailored, and memorable responses.

In the past, students could focus just on these types of standard interview questions. Why do you want to be a doctor? Why are you interested in our school? What are your strengths? While some schools still utilize the standard format of one interviewer speaking to one applicant for 30 minutes, many schools are adopting other formats.

Are you prepared for the MMI? This format has been utilized by such diverse medical schools as Stanford, Oregon Health Sciences University, Virginia Tech, UC Davis, and University of Cincinnati, among others. In the multiple mini-interview, the applicant moves from one station to another over a two-hour period. At each station, he or she is asked to respond to a question, a short structured scenario, or even a task. In Chapter 5, you'll learn more about the MMI, as well as the behavioral interview, the panel interview, and the group interview, among others.

In the following chapters, we review, in detail, other important aspects of the interview. You'll learn how to maximize your interview preparation, and what to expect on the typical interview day. We review the common pitfalls that we've seen multiple applicants make, over and over again, every interview season. You'll even learn about the best thank you notes, how to handle an offer of acceptance, and what to do if you're on the waitlist.

The recommendations in this book are based on multiple sources. Throughout the book, you'll see quotes from many different admissions officers. There's also been a substantial body of research on the topic of predicting which applicants will make the best physicians. We've included the results of these research studies, which have shaped and guided our recommendations. Lastly, the recommendations are based on extensive discussions with admissions faculty as well as applicants. Dr. Desai has served on the admissions committee at Baylor College of Medicine for over 10 years. He also provides interview preparation services for applicants to other medical schools, and both he and Dr. Katta have advised many applicants as they prepare for the residency match. *The Successful Match* is the best-selling title in the field of residency match preparation. In this book, we've applied the same combination of evidence-based advice and insider knowledge.

From personal experience, we've seen what works in an interview, and we've seen where students have failed. In the next 200+

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pages, you'll learn how to apply these lessons to your own application. It's taken years of intense work for you to reach this point, and receiving an invitation to interview is a strong vote of confidence from the medical school. In the following pages, you'll learn how to make the most of this opportunity in order to reach your goal: medical school.