

How to Put Your Best Self Forward in Plastic Surgery Residency Interviews

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“Whatever you are, be a good one.”

Abraham Lincoln

The annual American Society of Plastic Surgeons’ “Plastic Surgery: The Meeting” is always filled with great educational events and endeavors, and the 2015 gathering in Boston was truly exceptional. Perhaps the most memorable and most rewarding panel that we had the honor and pleasure to be a part of was the Medical Student Session, moderated by one of the first *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* Resident Ambassadors to the Editorial Board and the ASPS Board of Directors resident representative, Jacob Unger, M.D. This session included a dialogue to help prepare an already anxious group of medical students for the highly competitive plastic surgery residency interview process. For the past 2 years, both Dr. Rodriguez, from New York University, and Dr. Rohrich have fielded questions about what to say and what not to say in this, at times, challenging process in which medical students will be interviewing across the country at multiple programs in a rapid manner. In order to help medical students prepare to put their best selves forward, here are 25 tips we have compiled from our own experiences and adapted from a few interesting reads^{1,2} which we find to be helpful and especially germane with regard to plastic surgery residency interviewing; they can help students find not only their home for the next several years but also the best match for their personality, lifestyle, and work ethic. These tips are even more far-reaching in that they will help students as they

eventually go out to find their first job in the field of plastic surgery.

We recommend that medical students—and anyone preparing for a professional interview—do the following:

1. Remember that **your interview starts the moment you enter the city**. You must be especially “on” once you walk into the building or university, as anyone you meet may be connected (and should be treated as such) with the process. So, be nice, be cordial, and, most importantly, relax. Always arrive early; do not be late. If there are extenuating circumstances, please call ahead to forewarn them!
2. **Do your research** about each program individually by going to the program website or other sources of veracity. Do not rely entirely on what people tell you on the interview trail, as this information can be inaccurate or even deceiving. Know who the key faculty members are and their areas of expertise, so you can hold an intelligent conversation with them during the “Q and A” session of the interview. Your preparedness and insight into the program and its faculty will prove valuable.
3. “To thine own self, be true.” Always *be yourself*, as we want to see who you really are. **Don’t “fake it”** or try to be someone you are not. Not only will we know it in a heartbeat, but you will only be hurting yourself. You want to end up at the program that is best “matched” to you. This is a marriage and

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you should thus aim for the best possible fit. Some of the faculty will likely end up being mentors for a long time.

4. **Be humble;** let your résumé and recommendation letters speak to your accomplishments as you begin the individual interviews. However, you **DO** need to sell yourself in a modest manner by referencing your accomplishments appropriately in context. Just make sure your delivery does not come off as simply bragging about how great you are!
5. Make sure you **meet as many current residents as possible** and find out what the program is all about. Ask salient and appropriate questions about the diversity of cases, strengths and weakness of the program, current issues, and so on. The most important thing to discover is if the residents are generally and genuinely happy with—and confident in—their training; they will not fake it! Also, ask yourself, “are these the type of residents that I can befriend and work with extremely closely and intensely for 6 or more years?” This will be of great help during the interview process, as residents can provide invaluable feedback about you and how you interacted with them in this dialogue.
6. When you enter your meetings, look directly at the person interviewing you and make **good eye contact**. Always look the interviewer in the eyes like you are very interested in the encounter and you are here to change the world of plastic surgery! It is good form to err on the side of **politeness**. For example, “Hello, Dr. Jones. It is a true pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much for this opportunity today.” It is important to avoid looking around the room while you talk, as this tells us that you either are very nervous, are distracted, don’t care to be there, or lack confidence in what you are telling us; none of these reflect well on you!
7. You should not only sound caring and compassionate in all that you say but also mean it deeply. Please give your best 60- to 90-second **sound bite** about yourself, what you have done, and what makes you so different from all the other candidates; make those seconds count! You want to keep your halo effect intact during your interview and you can do so by starting out strong! Make a great and memorable first impression, without being overbearing or appearing too self-confident. Have a high confidence and energy level, but don’t be too aggressive; that is a true turn-off for all interviewers!
8. Please **practice** your sound bite overview of who you are and the potential difference you will make in the program you are visiting, as well as standard interview questions. A good way to practice is to call your voice mail or make a recording, and play it back to see if it is sincere! Always be honest with yourself. It may need some editing—your mother will tell you if it is okay.
9. Please **don’t bear any gifts** to your interviewers, such as ties, art, cards, or anything else. It is truly not appropriate and completely unnecessary, and will be seen as an unwelcome advance!
10. During the formal interview, note your **posture** and stand and sit tall. Don’t overdo it either; there is no need for a “robotic,” rigid, upright, and uptight posture. Sitting up attentively will communicate vigor, earnestness, and genuine interest. Slouching, slumping, and looking overly comfortable will make you look fatigued, cocky, or—worst of all—uninterested. Review your “interview” posture in the mirror or in photographs before you begin any interview.
11. Some thoughts on **attire**: please be conservative. Please avoid fragrant perfumes or colognes, as these could set off a headache in the room! Women, please avoid excessive makeup, ostentatious or distracting jewelry, or overly fancy clothes. Men, aim for a clean-shaven or well-trimmed look, a clean hair style, and a dark, wrinkle-free suit. A tip for all: polished shoes may help you feel and look the part, but don’t wear brand-new shoes. You need to be able to walk well and pain-free! No one wants to be remembered for what they wore at an interview; be remembered for what you say!
12. **General tips:** As plastic surgeons, we certainly celebrate individuality; but the introductory interview is not always the best place to introduce *all* of your personal preferences, style, and habits. For the interview, it might be best to cover tattoos as needed and remove piercings, aside from earrings for women. Brush your teeth ahead of time and have a breath mint handy. We don’t want to know what you had for breakfast or lunch by smelling it on you! Enter the building ready for your interview: silence your cell phone, throw away your Starbucks cup, and spit out your gum.

13. **Always be on guard** if you go to social events before, during, or after the interviews. Do not chew gum if you plan on engaging in conversation, and do not order the lobster and steak; no matter how delicious it looks, and even if someone else orders it, avoid the most expensive item on the menu! A good trick is to let others order first and monitor what the general trend at the table is. Say no to onions, garlic, as well as spicy and messy foods, and as a good rule of thumb, avoid the alcohol; save the champagne for once you get into the program of your choice. Remember, the residents are carefully monitoring you and your behavior. We don't want a party animal for a resident. This is not college; this is serious business.
14. If you are asked a question regarding your aspirations, be **genuine**. If you truly wish to be an academic plastic surgeon, have a methodical response. If you aspire to become a private practitioner, share your insight. We know that not everyone will become an academic plastic surgeon. What we most care for our specialty is to develop individuals who will contribute to our field, so be introspective.
15. Always **smile** and mean it. Remember, if you smile on the outside, you will be smiling on the inside as well. An honest smile is invaluable and incredibly telling about who you are and what you are trying to communicate. In addition, smiling can make your speech more positive—both in content and tone—and can increase your confidence.
16. Have a nice, firm **handshake**, but not too firm. Remember, we're surgeons and we need our hands to be uninjured! If you are an animated speaker, that's fine. Don't try to restrain from talking with your hands or gesturing, but do so in moderation. If you gesticulate too much, it can diminish from what you are actually saying, as can touching your mouth, wringing your hands, or fidgeting.
17. In plastic surgery, we are filled with egocentric personalities. Most of us do not particularly like that, so please **don't use "I" more than a couple of times** in your interview, as there are many other ways to tell us how great and wonderful you are!
18. Be courteous with everyone you meet, from the receptionist to the program director and chairperson. Most importantly, be nice to those who are there for you that day, such as the staff and our residents, as they always tell us who was pleasant, who was abrasive, and who was aloof. Remember, **everyone's opinion counts!**
19. If you are asked about other plastic surgery programs at which you are interviewing, **always be positive about other programs** and don't compare them at an interview.
20. If there are multiple interviewers in the room, be sure to **give everyone equal attention**. You never know who the true decision maker is. You need to connect in some way with each interviewer.
21. Always try to answer questions by communicating your areas of strength or personal success stories. This can help demonstrate **what makes you unique** rather than just explaining what you did; it also provides valuable insight into the sides of you that are not visible on a curriculum vitae or personal statement.
22. It is good to **ask some salient questions** throughout the interview. A good interview should be a dialogue, not a monologue. Asking questions during the interview will help you better answer later questions, prepare for future interviews, understand the institution, and, ultimately, make a decision. Please do not ask questions about salary, vacations, the call schedule, and so on. The residents can tell you about this. Take personal notes between your interviews and try not to ask the same questions twice. If you can't think of a question, it's acceptable to say you don't have one, but do not make it a frequent occurrence.
23. Often we ask about your strengths and weakness in your life as well as your successes and failures. These are great opportunities to really shine and **tell the interviewer about who you are** and why you the right person for the program. When asked questions about your life failures, it is imperative that you are honest and authentic. Explain what you learned from the experiences you share. Please don't get defensive. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. It is *how* you say it that really matters, rather than *what* you say. *Never* say "I have not had a life failure"; all of us have had them and this shows clear lack of insight! When we ask about your weaknesses or failures, please don't just "spin" a flaw into forte. That will come across just as well as it does on television when a politician does the same. It will make you seem disingenuous and detract

from your credibility. If we ask about a weakness, offer a true one. Prepare a good answer for this question, and tell us what you've learned from this flaw.

24. Be a **good listener**. The questions asked by a faculty interviewer will always provide some clues as to what you should say! The most important thing we look for is someone who will be a team player, gets along well with others, works hard, admits mistakes, and learns from those mistakes.
25. Above all, **enjoy this great and unique opportunity** to visit with and get to know some of the best plastic surgery programs and educators in the world. They are real people and most of the time you will find them to be very down to earth, kind, and gentle.

The people conducting your residency interviews want to help you become the best plastic surgeon you can be, so the next era of plastic surgery advances the field even further to improve patient care, patient safety, and outcomes. Remember

to always enjoy this journey to an important destination.

"Far better is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer because they live in the grey twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat."

Theodore Roosevelt

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