

Presenting the best of you

Thinking about your brand as you get ready to apply for dermatology residency

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Constructing your application

Your CV and ERAS applications are summaries of your professional, academic, and personal accomplishments. While they are often seen as a grab bag of *every* accomplishment, their primary role is a written **sales document** providing the supporting evidence of your **brand**. Therefore, rather than giving *equal* emphasis on everything you have ever done, there is room to emphasize those activities that support your overall story.



For example, if applying to be a pastry chef, talk about the time you spent in France that influenced your baking style or a cooking award. You can even talk about your enjoyment of yoga that helps keeps you balanced amidst the demands as a pastry chef. Anything that does not genuinely tie into the overall brand you are trying to build can be de-emphasized.

These documents need to be **impactful, organized, succinct, and to the point**. *Every single word needs to count!* Think of how your eyes glaze over when you see a large block of text. Admissions committees are looking at hundreds of such blocks and may spend just *5 – 10 minutes* most your application for the initial review. There are ways to keep your readers engaged in what you have written.

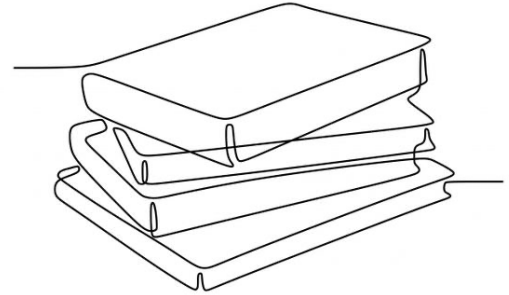
In general, your CV should follow this basic format:

- 1. Education**
 - 2. Experiences (Professional, Research, Volunteer)**
 - 3. Personal & Others**
- **Highlight** those accomplishments that directly relate to the story and brand you are trying to convey, and those that will catch the readers' eyes. Words like Phi Beta Kappa, Rhodes Scholar, American Idol participant, first place winner in Dallas succulents arrangement competition, catch the eye.
 - **Be as specific as possible.** The written application is not the time for vagueness. The goal is to succeed at the difficult task of convey as much information in as few words as possible. For example, instead of "conducted lab experiments and published academic papers during gap research year," consider "funded melanoma genomics research resulting in 3 first-author publications."
 - **Emphasize results when possible.** You can use flowery language (don't!) to prove your accomplishments, or you can give the numerical results that say the same thing with more impact. Do the latter when you can. In general, when describing a project you did, follow PARS (the problem address, actions you took, results, skills you developed)
 - **Emphasize words that you want to highlight.** The limited and targeted use of **bold**, *italics*, and underlines goes a long way. Just be careful not to use it too often.
 - **Everything short, concise, bulleted.** Avoid full sentences because they add too many characters. Avoid the, conjunctions, the word "very," and adjectives. If you need adjectives, make sure you use the most specific one-word adjective – time to take out the thesaurus. Bullets make everything easier to digest. Avoid long sentences and big blocks of text. Do not use pronouns, jargon, repetition of the same words.
 - **Use reverse chronological order** to organize your CV. Talk about the most recent and activities with the longest engagement first. Most attention is spent on what comes *first* on the page, use that to your advantage.

- **Be consistent** throughout the application. Use past tense, concise, and focused sentences. Use the same format to describe projects. Once the reader becomes comfortable with how you describe your activities, it becomes easier to digest the next and the next.
 - **Again, think about the story you want to sell.** Avoid the temptation to add every activity you have engaged in, which can dilute those that reflect substantial engagement and/or accomplishment.
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Your story

It is easy to devote all your energy into focusing on Board Scores, Grades, and Publications prior to applying to dermatology. But what too often gets overlooked is your **story or brand**. It may make up for deficiencies in other aspects of your application, and often will be the deciding factor in getting you to stand out from the pack. In some cases, applicants are surprised that they have not received the number of interviews or the caliber of interviews they anticipated despite a stellar academic record. This is often attributable to the lack of branding. The quantifiable aspects of your application are important but are unlikely to make you shine without a compelling, authentic, and cohesive story that led you to apply to dermatology. The other part that is often overlooked is your plans for your career after training, which should be a logical outgrowth from your story.



The story or brand you want to sell needs to be incorporated *everywhere* – CV, interview, projects, letters of recommendations. But it should all come together cohesively as a written declaration in your *personal statement*. **Think of yourself as an asset.** You will bring a unique perspective and skillset to your future residency program. Your path to dermatology should reflect **self-development** and **carving your own path** in the field – these signal maturity. Therefore, resist the urge to take on projects simply to cushion your CV, especially when they are projects that do not align with your aspirations and interests. Despite what feels like the pressure of being a fully formed dermatologist before starting residency, this is *not* an expectation that residency programs have. Having the *humility* to reflect on how a program can help *you* continue to develop your passions is important, and important to share!

Individuate yourself. Dermatology applicants are generally highly-qualified and conduct similar types of extracurricular work – that’s wonderful, but it does not help you stand out. Each one of you will bring something truly unique to your program and the field of dermatology. For many of you it will be your research. But it can be so many more things for example:

- *Life experiences that shaped the way you want to impact patient care*
- *A unique perspective that is not represented in dermatology (e.g., BIPOC, LGBTQ, untraditional career paths, etc.)*
- *Activities that exemplify your personality (e.g., theater work, sports teams, creative writing)*

Unique sounding activities and experiences can help distinguish you. But more importantly, reflecting on these experiences to convey **growth mindset** and the **development of passion** can be more powerful.

It is okay not to know. Most people do not have enough time to have a fully fleshed out story, and so it is okay to not know. Some people get involved with many very different things, and that is okay too. It is okay to take on projects for the purpose of exploration, and it is okay to change trajectories. But you should always reflect on *why* you do what you do and how that will make you a more developed clinician in the future. Untraditional paths are many times the more compelling stories when sufficiently reflected upon. Think about all your experiences as a Venn diagram. Is there something there where all your experiences overlap? This is what you should share.

Ask yourself if you have enough evidence to support your brand. If you make the argument that you want to commit your life to basic science research, but you have never stepped into a lab, while it may be true, it will likely not be compelling. If you say you are interested in global health but have never had a passport, again, it may be a sign to rethink the brand you are trying to sell or look to gain relevant experiences to support your story.

The interview

You've been invited for an interview – **congratulations!** This is the opportunity for programs to take a deeper dive into you – your personality, your motivations, your thought processes, your spirit. This is also the opportunity for you to glean these aspects about the program. Don't forget that an interview is a two-way street!ⁱ

The interview is like a dance wherein you must respond to whom you are dancing with – there is not one formula that will help you succeed at all interviews. But there are a few qualities associated with success in the interview: **calm, ease, friendliness, maturity, and warmth.**



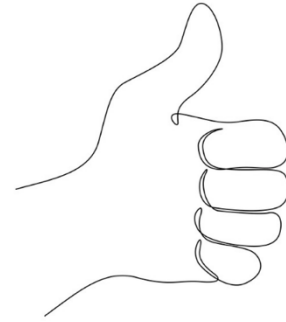
- **Don't be yourself. Instead, be the best version of yourself.** Face it, we are not always the best, but you have great attributes that brought you to where you are today. Focus on the qualities that draw others to you, and for all your deficiencies, rehearsal is your friend. Ask a friend to evaluate you on what qualities you bring that draw others in, and what qualities may need to be improved upon. Bring as much energy and enthusiasm to the interview as you can, but don't oversell yourself or pretend you are someone you are not.
- **Ace the first 30 seconds.** First impressions matter. How you speak, how you enter the room, how you stand, how you make eye contact, how comfortable you look are very important. Programs want to see maturity and professionalism. Think about your favorite physician who walks into a patient's room and brings a sense of confidence and ease with them.
- **Be prepared and be ready for tough questions.** There is a standard list of questions that programs will often ask, think in advance about how you would respond so you are not caught off guard. Make sure you know the basics about a program, and why you would want to attend that program (every program has something positive to offer!). But if you come across a curve ball question, it is okay to give a few moments to think of your response. Try: *"that is a great question, can I have a few moments to think about it?"*
- **Build rapport.** In general, the vibe you want to give off is one of friendliness, calm, and ease. This takes practice and may require a different approach based on who is interviewing you. When appropriate, start the conversation with something more casual – talk about something you have in common with your interviewer (looking for items in their office can be a good place to start).
- **Make eye contact (or webcam contact).** It conveys you are interested in the conversation! Looking down not only signals disinterest to the interviewer but will also lower the energy you bring.
- **Take charge of the interview.** You may feel that you will be at the mercy of the interviewer – this is not true. You have the power to guide the conversation in a direction you would like to go (perhaps to focus instead on what you are proud of, or to talk about something not addressed in your application).ⁱⁱ The interview is in your control but make sure you think about transitions between topics. Abrupt shifts in the conversation can be awkward.
- **Silence.** It is okay (and advisable) to take time to think about your responses to a conversation. It is okay to allow some moment of silence to pass.
- **Listen.** Do not be the person who comes across looking like they are thinking about their next response. Remember that at the end of the day, the interview is a conversation. That requires listening to the other person. It is important to have prepared responses, but it should be part of a conversation, you want to make the answers not sound rehearsed. Do you want to have a 10-minute conversation with a robot? – maybe your first time, but not dozens of times. Listen to the question carefully and make sure you are answering the question rather than answering the question you want to answer. It is okay to clarify, *"I want to make sure I understood your question, could you please repeat,"* or *"were you asking about ..."*
- **Don't feel the pressure to rehash your CV.** The programs already have your CV, they know what's on it. Your interview is not the time for an oral dictation of your CV. The interview is a time for programs to get to know *you* as a person, and what sort of professional colleague you will be in the future.
- **Do not give answers you think the programs want to hear.** Again, what will serve you the best is selling your brand and presenting who *you* are. You may feel that programs are looking for a certain mold of a resident, and while that may be true, it often is not. While programs like UT Southwestern have a reputation

for preferring those with an academic trajectory (not true), if you say you want to pursue an academic track but that is not supported by the rest of your brand, it will create tension in your application.

- **Prepare well-researched and thoughtful questions.** A good place to start is to look for the overlapping interests you have with your faculty interviewers, for example, their academic research. If done correctly, this can be very flattering to your interviewer. In the same vein, ask the right questions to the right people. For example, do not ask the CTCL expert about surgical training. Beyond specific questions, having a list of good general questions is useful to have in your back pocket. As questions that you are genuinely interested in hearing about, for example, *“Can you tell me about your first reactions when you moved to Dallas, and what positive things about it that keep you here?”* or *“Tell me about the activities faculty get to have with residents outside of clinic.”*

Things to consider for a virtual interview:ⁱⁱⁱ

- **Prepare** – make sure that you familiarize yourself with the technology beforehand
- **Appearance** – you want to look professional, but the virtual format allows you to showcase bits of yourself without talking about them (choosing what pictures are on your wall, what color suit jacket you wear). But when in doubt, a blank neutral wall is a safe option. Consider getting a ring light! Consider standing up during the interview to make the experience more dynamic and to avoid slouching.
- **Positive mindset and convey warmth** – there are fewer non-verbal cues at your disposal when going into a virtual interview, and errors and mistakes may happen. Stay positive – you only have to do it for a few minutes.
- **Exaggerate emotions on screen** – audio gets compressed and undertones may get lost, you may have to exaggerate your emotions a little more. Do not be afraid to be expressive!
- **Do a trial run** – have friends, colleagues, and mentors give feedback on your virtual presence. Record yourself giving responses to a fake interview – this is super awkward, but trust me, after watching yourself for the third or fourth time, it gets much easier and you will see the utility of it!



Other resources

- **YouTube videos:**
 - Harvard Extension School “How to ace an interview: 5 tips from a Harvard Career Advisor:”
 - Forbes “How to ace your job interview over Zoom”
- **Podcasts**
 - Harvard Business Review, Women at Work “The Essentials: Giving Feedback”
 - Harvard Business Review, IdeaCast “The art of the interview”
 - Work Life TED, “When Strength Becomes Weakness”
- **Articles**
 - See citations below

ⁱ Trull SG. Strategies of Effective Interviewing. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/1964/01/strategies-of-effective-interviewing>

ⁱⁱ Gallo A. Stand Out in Your Interview. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2012/09/stand-out-in-your-interview>

ⁱⁱⁱ Gallo A. How to Nail a Job Interview – Remotely. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/06/how-to-nail-a-job-interview-remotely>