Virtual R1 Match Playbook

Part 1: Application and Documents

JANUARY 2021
Virtual R1 Match Playbook for Canadian Medical Students

This playbook was written by CMA Ambassadors to help final-year medical students with their upcoming CaRMS R-1 match. Part 1 focuses on the application process, including tips and tricks, useful reminders, resources and insights the Ambassadors gained from first-hand experience. The playbook is not meant to be an exhaustive resource; it focuses instead on the human side of the match. From the perspective of people who went through the match themselves in the last few years, it covers many key considerations that will help students to succeed at applying, interviewing and matching in 2021.

PART 1
• Applying to CaRMS
• Curriculum vitae and personal statements
• Letters of reference

PART 2
• Interview preparation
• Interview formats and strategies
• Interview questions and approaches
• Ranking programs

PART 3
• The match
• Going unmatched
• Wellness supports

We recommend reading the entire playbook to take full advantage of the insights and tips from CMA Ambassadors.

Parts 2 and 3 will be released soon.
Applying to CaRMS

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START EARLY!

Deadlines can sneak up on you quickly and there’s a lot of different paperwork to organize and write.

- The CaRMS match participation fee includes nine program applications. Be sure to make use of all of them! That being said...

  > Apply for a program only if you think there’s a reasonable chance you would actually want to join the program and the specialty. **Your time is valuable**, so don’t apply just for the sake of applying.

BE TRUE TO YOUR VALUES.

Ask yourself:

  > **What qualities am I looking for in a program?**
    Is the cohort the right size for me? Is the balance between service and formal learning right for me? Will I be given opportunities to learn in different settings (e.g., rural versus urban, academic versus community) that align with my personal interests and that will support my career goals?

  > **What do I consider to be “deal-breakers”?**
    Am I willing to relocate? If so, how far am I willing to go?
    Among other things, consider proximity to friends/family and the amenities of the academic campus(es), hospital(s) and community/communities that you will be learning and living in.
TAILOR EACH APPLICATION.

For each program you’re considering, review the CaRMS program description pages in detail, as well as the school and program’s websites, to individualize your application.

> The requirements will vary from program to program. Missing subtle differences could result in your application being filtered out.

> Be mindful of the maximum word count for applications, be sure to answer all questions and do not forget to proofread each application with the support of someone you trust — especially if you’re reusing parts of your statements.

• If you have questions, do not hesitate to get in touch with the designated contact(s) for each program early.

> Many programs provide opportunities for applicants to connect with current residents. Try to take advantage of these offers to learn more about residents’ first-hand experiences.

> Some program directors are also willing to connect with applicants one on one. Ask the program contacts if this is offered.
Applying to French/bilingual programs:

• True fluency in speaking, reading and writing is an absolute must for these streams and you must be comfortable demonstrating your fluency during interviews.

• These programs are based in communities where a strong command of French is necessary not only for patient interactions but also for navigating the electronic medical records, functioning day to day within clinical environments, and integrating into the local community.

Applying to rural/remote streams:

• Be sure to familiarize yourself with each program’s application process for these streams. Some require additional materials or, in certain instances, a separate application altogether for each community to which you wish to apply.
Applying as an international medical graduate (IMG):

- There are a limited number of IMG residency positions at each university and within each specialty and program. Each year, there are far more IMG applications than IMG residency positions; therefore, IMGs are significantly less likely to match than Canadian medical graduates (CMGs). With this in mind:

**APPLY AS BROADLY AS YOU CAN.**

Consider applying to programs in multiple specialties.

> Be sure to consider applying to French/bilingual programs (if you have the necessary language skills) or rural/remote streams if you feel that you may be a good fit and that you can succeed and learn well in them. These sites sometimes have fewer applicants (both IMGs and CMGs) and thus warrant additional consideration.

- If you have not already applied through the United States’ National Resident Matching Program (NRMP), you’re strongly advised to do so concomitantly with the CaRMS R-1 Main Residency Match.

> Although the matching process is the US is also highly competitive, the probability of IMGs matching there is higher because there are many more positions available.
ESTABLISH CONTINGENCY PLANS EARLY ON.

While you’re working to obtain a residency position, seek opportunities to gain clinical experience in Canada to stay current, build on your skill set and maintain your confidence. For example, you might apply to clinical assistant programs, obtain a clinical trainee licence or engage in clinical externship programs or clinical observerships, if you can secure appropriate supervision. Be prepared for the possibility that you may not be able to obtain a residency position in Canada, despite your dedicated efforts. The chances of successfully matching for residency in Canada may decrease with each passing year. Think about what you’ll do if you’re not able to practise medicine in this country.
Applying to CaRMS: Curriculum Vitae and Personal Statements

Amanda Chapman
University of Western Ontario
Your curriculum vitae (CV) and personal statement are the first introduction that programs have to you. Although it can be challenging to articulate in writing who you are as an applicant, both professionally and personally, and how you’re a good fit for a specialty or program (your “narrative”), this guide provides some practical tips and suggestions to help you in this process. Remember that the documents serve very different purposes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CURRICULUM VITAE</th>
<th>PERSONAL STATEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Showcases the breadth of your academic, professional and extracurricular experience, tailored to present your overall qualifications for a residency position</td>
<td>Demonstrates your motivation and commitment to a specialty and the specific program, including summarizing your “fit” for that specialty and program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Getting feedback**

When candidates write application documents, they often reread them so frequently that they begin to lose sight of the overall purpose. It can be extremely helpful to have someone you trust review your documents to understand how your narrative appears to someone else. Consider asking for feedback from peers, residents, faculty mentors, physician supervisors, university career services staff or friends who are not in medicine. You can even consider using a text-to-voice program to hear your personal statement read aloud.
Incorporating feedback

CAREFULLY CONSIDER THE FEEDBACK, BUT DON’T TAKE IT AS THE FINAL WORD.

Each reader’s opinion of your documents will be based on their personal experiences, so there’s a large margin for individuality. Thoughtfully consider the feedback you receive and then decide how, or even if, you want to incorporate it.

• Fix grammar and spelling mistakes promptly.

  > As you edit and revise your documents, you will constantly be rewording statements and adding content. Promptly correct grammar and spelling errors.

• Keep multiple drafts going.

  > If you receive feedback that suggests changing a large portion of the text, consider keeping both the old and new versions to present to your next reviewer. When you rewrite content multiple times, you risk losing strong points in the process. Keeping past drafts can help you sift through the changes to determine which version best presents your desired narrative.
Personal statements

A personal statement is a less structured showcase of who you are than your CV. Personal statements often include stories to demonstrate applicants’ journey and experience in medicine thus far. Most importantly, your statement should present a cohesive argument that highlights your motivation and interest in that specialty, how you “fit” with the specialty on the basis of your clinical and personal experiences and why you’re interested in a specific program.

Things to reflect on

The following questions will help you to determine the story that you want your personal statement to tell and therefore what you want to include in it. Revisit these questions throughout the writing process.

WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVATION TO PURSUE THIS SPECIALTY?
• Consider past personal or clinical events that helped guide you in selecting the specialty.

WHAT EXPERIENCES AND SKILLS DO YOU HAVE THAT DEMONSTRATE THAT YOU ARE WELL EQUIPPED FOR THIS SPECIALTY?
• These can be formal or informal, clinical or extracurricular, and personal or professional.
• Do not consider only technical skills. Your soft skills (communication skills, flexibility, leadership, etc.) affect how you interact with your work environment, team members and patients.
Describing your activities and experiences

• **Accomplishment statements:** Rather than simply stating your basic responsibilities in a role, phrase them in accomplishment statements that incorporate the skills you practised in that role and the overall impact you had with your success. For these, consider including one or two overall challenges or tasks you faced within the role, the specific action(s) you took to tackle them and the end result or impact of your action. This helps demonstrate to the reader the value and relevance of the experience.

• **Action verbs:** Start each statement with a strong action verb that relates to the skill used in the activity.

• **Correct terminology:** For each role, ensure you include your position title, the organization, the location and the duration.

• **Be selective:** Any content on your CV may be brought up during interviews, so only include things that you’re comfortable discussing.
Structuring your personal statement

The structure of your personal statement is up to you. Here is a sample format that you can use to help organize your thoughts into a cohesive and comprehensive statement:

THE HOOK

• In the first few sentences, introduce the overall theme of your statement with the goal of enticing the reader to keep reading.

> Applicants often include a personal anecdote, quote or memory that demonstrates their motivation for practising medicine or their interest in a particular specialty.

> Avoid simply chronologically listing how your interest in a specialty developed.

WHY THIS SPECIALTY

• Present a well-rounded argument that shows that you’ve seriously considered why you’re motivated and committed to join this specialty:

> Experiential motivators can include clinical or personal events.

> Logistical motivators can include patient population, scope of practice, procedures, work environment, team dynamics or lifestyle.
WHY YOU FOR THIS SPECIALTY

• Demonstrate how you’re an ideal fit for the specialty.

  > When discussing your experiences, don’t list them like you would in a CV. Instead, selectively use them to tell a story about why you’re a good fit for the specialty.

  > Look at the qualities emphasized in the program description, particularly the CanMEDS roles, and consider if you can give examples that demonstrate how you exemplified them.

CAREER GOALS

• Applicants often reference objectives or ideals for their future career, including research, teaching, working in an urban versus rural setting, or opportunities for additional training.

WHY THIS PROGRAM

• Customize this section for each program by considering elective experiences, resident/faculty relationships, available support systems, program-specific qualities (schedules, supports, etc.) and city-specific qualities.

CONCLUSION

• Summarize your overall strengths and enthusiasm for the specialty and program.

• To create a full-circle and complete statement, it can be creative and enticing to link your ending to your initial hook, if possible.
## Curriculum vitae

When approaching your CV, ask yourself, "If I were reading this CV for the first time, what kind of inferences would I make about this candidate?" Although you cannot change the experiences you’ve had, you can influence how a reader is introduced to your background. Therefore, be strategic in how you organize your information, your word choices and the overall aesthetic appearance of your document.

## Possible sections

The following list includes information that you can consider including in your CV. The topics should be clearly divided into distinct sections. Remember that **you ultimately control what content is included**, and these choices will shape your personal narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Awards and achievements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Electives</td>
<td>(including projects,</td>
<td>Professional development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership experience</td>
<td>presentations, publications)</td>
<td>Committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching experience</td>
<td>Community involvement</td>
<td>Memberships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
<td>Languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interests and hobbies</td>
</tr>
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Describing your activities and experiences

- **Accomplishment statements**: Rather than simply stating your basic responsibilities in a role, phrase them in accomplishment statements that incorporate the skills you practised in that role and the overall impact you had with your success. For these, consider including one or two overall challenges or tasks you faced within the role, the specific action(s) you took to tackle them and the end result or impact of your action. This helps demonstrate to the reader the value and relevance of the experience.

- **Action verbs**: Start each statement with a strong action verb that relates to the skill used in the activity.

- **Correct terminology**: For each role, ensure you include your position title, the organization, the location and the duration.

- **Be selective**: Any content on your CV may be brought up during interviews, so only include things that you’re comfortable discussing.
Organizing your information

• **Start off strong:** Generally, readers devote the most attention to the first page, and their attentiveness can decrease as they read, so ensure you put the most relevant sections of your CV at the beginning. Consider what experiences the specialty/program values and structure the order accordingly (e.g., research, leadership, community involvement).

• **Be selective and purposeful:** To ensure you maintain the reader’s attention, your CV should ideally be between two and four pages long. Therefore, be selective about what content you include. To keep your CV from getting too long:

  1. Remove outdated and irrelevant activities.
  2. Provide activity descriptions only for activities in which you played a major role.
  3. Be flexible about formatting, section divisions and orders, and font sizes.

• **Tailor when possible:** Although there’s not much room for customizing a CV for specific specialties, you can be selective about the order in which you place activities and how you title sections. You may wish to highlight certain aspects of your background with a “Specialty-specific experiences” heading or strategically order research projects, extracurricular activities or overall sections.

• **Use reverse chronological order:** List your activities from most to least recent. Consider removing activities from high school unless they’re significant or continued during your undergraduate degree.
FORMATTING PEARLS

- **Concise header**: Limit your header to just your name, one phone number and a professional email (preferably school) — listing your postal address is optional.

- **Consistency**: Be consistent with fonts, sizing, alignment, bolding, italicizing, lines and the format you use to indicate the time frame of activities — this makes a more cohesive and readable CV.

- **Balance**: Keep everything well spaced out. Cramming too much text onto a page will make it difficult to read, but you should also avoid having so much blank space that the page looks empty.

- **Full pages**: Avoid leaving blank space at the bottom of your last page (if possible), as this can make your CV look unfinished or incomplete.

- **Split content**: Try to ensure that activity descriptions do not get split between pages.

- **Bold your authorship**: For publications and presentations, bold your name so your authorship stands out.
Applying to CaRMS: Letters of Reference

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Reference letters are one of the most important components of your application. Each program has specific requirements and preferences. However, when it comes to picking the right referees, there are a few tips that apply to most specialties.

**PICK A REFEREE WHO KNOWS YOU WELL.**

When considering requesting a letter, ask yourself if the referee truly knows who you are, understands your strengths and appreciates your genuine commitment to the specialty to which you’re applying.

- Letters from clinical supervisors are often preferred over letters from research supervisors. In particular, it’s better to select referees who can speak to your clinical skill set, your ability to advocate for your patients, your willingness to learn and your collegiality working within a team.

- If you’re applying to a specialty in which you have not completed an elective rotation, consider asking staff physicians you worked with during your core rotation (if applicable) for that specialty.
Tips and tricks

• When asking for a reference letter, it’s helpful to send referees your CV and your personal statement to help them tailor your letter.

  > Do not hesitate to ask referees what will help them write you a strong and supportive letter.

  > It may also be useful to share your rotation evaluation or notes on interesting cases you managed together to help remind referees of your time with them.

• If you’re applying to multiple specialties, you can ask your referees to write a generic letter (i.e., that does not specify a particular discipline) so that you can use it to apply to multiple specialties.

Staff physicians are busy, so be sure to SEND OUT REFERENCE LETTER REQUESTS EARLY (ideally at least 4–6 weeks before the deadline) to give them sufficient time to compose a strong letter on your behalf.

  > It’s not uncommon for letters to be submitted by referees very close to the deadline, hence there may be certain instances where your letter is not submitted before the final deadline.

  > Try to request additional letters from other supervisors that you can use in these unforeseen circumstances to meet the application requirements.