



HOW TO EFFECTIVELY SHADOW A HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

Why is Shadowing Important?

Shadowing is the act of following a professional as they do their typical work activities in a clinic or hospital setting. You might ask why this experience is so important? First, it may be the defining experience which tells you whether or not you want to be a physician. Shadowing gives you a very tangible sense of what life is like for a professional. Through working alongside a professional, you can gain unique insight into what happens in a day in the life of your career of choice. You get a sense of what it's like working with patients, working with other health care professionals (nurses, PAs, and therapists), and what the challenges and rewards are of working in the profession. You'll learn how a health professional organizes their day, allows time for the unexpected, stays current in the profession, integrates personal and professional life, and manage the financial aspects of their practice.

Shadowing can also be crucial for a second reason: Having clinical experience allows admissions committees know that you have some understanding of what you are getting into. It also shows admissions officers your commitment to a health career because you have taken initiative in learning about being a professional prior to applying to school.

WHEN TO SHADOW

There are several times when shadowing can be useful. First, it can be useful in high school or college when you're trying to figure out if you'd like to be a physician/dentist/vet. Maybe you're trying to choose your major and better define your future career path? Shadowing can give you a real sense of what kind of work physicians do.

Next, if you are thinking of applying to professional school soon, shadowing will give you the opportunity to work closely with a professional who could provide you with a **letter of recommendation**. Shadowing is also helpful down the line in school, as it can give you an opportunity to work with different medical specialties.

WHERE TO BEGIN

Identify Your Connections & Connect!

After you have decided which health professions pathway you want to explore, it is time to start finding shadowing experiences and making connections! Here are some suggestions of where you can start:

- **Easier – Connect with people you know!** Friends, relatives, your own health providers, neighbors, fellow students. These are all wonderful resources for finding opportunities to shadow. Network! Network! Network!
- **More Targeted – You can investigate and find other people, cast the net far and wide:**
 - ✓ Professional organizations and directories
 - ✓ Check hospital websites. They often have a specific office for helping individuals seek out volunteer opportunities.
 - ✓ A Google Search
 - ✓ [MiddNet](#) Alumni search

PREPARING TO MAKE A SHADOWING REQUEST

Before you reach out to arrange the shadowing experience get your resume ready and think about your availability. Practice what you will say in your introductions.

- **Arrange the Shadowing Experience:** Contact the person by telephone; or by an email followed by a telephone call.
 - ✓ Think about (and practice) what you will say in your introduction.
 - ✓ Contact the individual and ask if they are open to having a student shadow.
 - ✓ Make it clear you are seeking shadowing experience and understand the HIPAA regulations and privacy concerns.
 - ✓ Be certain to identify a date, time and location for the shadowing opportunity and a phone number you can use later to confirm (approximately one day in advance). Remember to be flexible in your scheduling as the health care providers are voluntarily spending their time with you.
 - ✓ If possible, make your first contact in person: Plan your trip – map the locations you will be going to.
- **Tips on Making the Call (In person or on phone):**
 - ✓ Introduce yourself.
 - ✓ State who referred you (*if you have a direct connection always state their name.*)
 - ✓ State the purpose of your call.
 - ✓ *If this is a “cold call”, ask if they have ever had a student shadow.*
- **Handling the Yes and No Responses After the Request:**
 - ✓ If the response is no, thank them for considering your request.
 - ✓ Ask if you can keep their info for future shadowing.
 - ✓ If yes (and your schedules don’t match), thank them for the offer.
 - ✓ If yes (and availability matches), accept the opportunity.
 - ✓ Ask if they need additional information from you before starting.

Create a system for follow up: Track your shadowing requests in an excel spreadsheet or use a Google doc. This will help you know to whom you have reached out and will help you create a plan as you continue to seek additional shadowing opportunities.

WHEN SHADOWING – DO’S AND DON’TS

There are some things you can and should do, and there are some things you definitely should be careful not to do when shadowing:

- Be punctual every day. As they say in the military – early is on-time, on-time is late, and late is not acceptable.
- Wear professional attire. Wear minimal jewelry. Go light on cologne/perfume, or do not wear it.
- Be as discreet and inconspicuous as possible. If a patient/client does not want you in the room for the visit or rounds, you must respect this and step out.
- Be observant. Ask questions at appropriate times. If the schedule for the day is particularly busy, you may find it is best to write your questions down and ask after your shift or before rounds.
- Turn off or silence your cell phone.
- Bring a note pad or device on which to take notes.

MAKE THE MOST OF THE EXPERIENCE

It is very important to make the most of your shadowing experience. Engage in the process, observe, and ask questions when appropriate. Make your shadowing count!

- ✓ Read about things you learn while shadowing. You are not expected to have any medical knowledge, but reading about diseases and asking insightful questions can demonstrate your interest.
- ✓ Shadow the same professional for a good chunk of time, e.g. every day for a couple of weeks or 3 times per week for a summer. Spending real time with a health professional will give you a much better sense of the profession, more so than if you spend a couple of days.
- ✓ Be open and willing to do some work while you’re there! If you’re asked to file something or look something up to help in the daily grind in the clinic or hospital, do it and do it well!

- ✓ When you conclude the experience, request a letter of recommendation from the professional with whom you worked for your application.
- ✓ Ask questions!

Possible Questions for Shadowing Experience:

- ✓ On a typical day, what do you do?
- ✓ How many patients do you see each day?
- ✓ How many hours do you work in a typical day/week?
- ✓ What kinds of problems do you deal with?
- ✓ How do you allocate your time?
- ✓ How does the time use vary? Are there busy and slow times or is the work activity fairly constant?
- ✓ What personal qualities or abilities are important to being a successful physician/dentist/veterinarian/___?
- ✓ Is there a demand for people in this specialty? (if relevant)
- ✓ What types of continued education or training are required?
- ✓ What do you look for in a colleague?
- ✓ Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this field?
- ✓ How do you work with difficult patients?
- ✓ From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in medicine/dentistry/veterinary medicine?
- ✓ What surprised you most about working in this field?
- ✓ What advances do you think will be made in this field and how will that impact your career?
- ✓ How do you balance work and family responsibilities?
- ✓ How does technology play a role in this field or in your job?
- ✓ How did you choose to pursue this profession? Did you consider anything else?

Consider keeping a journal where you can write down your thoughts immediately following the shadowing experience. Make sure to track your hours. This will help you when you fill out your application later.

CLOSING OUT THE EXPERIENCE

- **Put the information to use!** Review your notes and evaluate what you learned. Analyze the information you gathered. Self-reflection is important, reflect on your experience and record the information gathered, check out the self-reflection questions below to get you started.
- **Request a final meeting:** Make sure to thank the professional for the opportunity and during your debriefing highlight what you learned from the experience.
- **Ask for referrals to more health care professionals:** Ask for permission to use their name when contacting others.
- **Follow Up:** Be sure to send a thank-you note (hand-written if your hand-writing is legible) to the person you shadowed within one week of the experience. Stay in touch with them and let them know how helpful it was.

REFLECTION – SAMPLE QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Choose several questions that are based on what you would like to reflect on. Most of these are open-ended questions that require more than a yes or no answer so that you can learn more from your experiences.

What am I learning from my shadowing/or my chosen field?

- ✓ Patient Interactions?
- ✓ The patient's illness?
- ✓ Lifestyle issues that may impact health?
- ✓ How to listen?
- ✓ The health care professional-patient relationship?
- ✓ What the patients are teaching me?
- ✓ Myself?
- ✓ What it is really like to be a _____?
- ✓ How are these experiences impacting my decision to pursue this career?