

2026–27

Applicant Preference Signaling FAQs

FAQs

AUPO ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

 **sfmatch**
Residency and Fellowship Matching Services

Q What is preference signaling?

A Preference signaling, also known as program signaling, is a process in which applicants can indicate a heightened level of interest in a program by sending a signal to the program during the residency match process. When you submit your application, you can select specific programs to signal your heightened interest.

Preference signaling is a widespread practice across medical specialties with a wide variety of signals and signaling approaches.

Q How has signaling been received by applicants?

A A post-rank list deadline survey of ophthalmology residency applicants during the 2025–2026 match cycle, with 514 responses, found that roughly 66% of applicants agreed that preference signaling allowed effective communication of genuine interest to specific programs; 50% agreed that signals increased their chances of receiving interview invitations; 33% agreed that signaling increased their opportunity to match; 75% supported the continued use of preference signaling.

Q How will programs use my signals?

A Each program will decide for itself how, when, and whether to use signals in its selection process. There is no uniform or prescriptive method for integrating signals into its evaluation process.

Q How do I submit my signals to the programs I am interested in?

A When you prepare your application with SF Match, you will have the opportunity to select up to 15 programs to signal. Your signals will be sent to the programs when you submit your application.

Q How many signals will I have?

A Each applicant will have 15 signals for the 2026–2027 match cycle.

Q

Do I have to use all 15 signals?

A

No, you may decide how many signals you would like to use; however, there is no downside to using all signals, and we strongly recommend you do so.

Q

Can I send more than one signal to the same program?

A

No, you can send only one signal per program, regardless of your level of interest in that program.

Q

Do I have to use all my signals during my initial application distribution, or can I send unused signals if I later apply to additional programs?

A

You are not required to use all 15 signals during your initial application distribution.

You may send unused signals to additional programs in subsequent application distributions.

Q

Once I submit my signals, do I have any ability to change them or modify them?

A

Once you submit any signal, you may not retract it, unless a signaled program withdraws from the match unexpectedly.

Q

If I use my signal at a program that does not offer me an interview, can I reuse that signal for a different program?

A

No, signals cannot be retracted or reused once sent.

Q

If I signal a program, am I guaranteed to get an interview?

A

No, signaling a program does not guarantee an interview. However, signaling communicates your heightened interest in that program.

Q

What if a program has two tracks in SF Match (research and clinical)? Does one signal apply to both tracks, or do I need to signal each track separately?

A

If you are strongly interested in both tracks in a program and want each to receive a signal, you would need to signal each track separately, using 2 of your 15 signals.

Q

Are programs allowed to share information about the signals they receive with other programs?

A

No, programs are not allowed to share information on the signals they do or don't receive with other programs. This would violate SF Match rules.

Q

Will I still be able to personalize my personal statements to indicate my unique interest in specific programs?

A

Yes, SF Match allows unique personal statements for each program. You may use these personal statements to express a specific interest in any program, regardless of whether you sent a signal to that program. If there is a specific reason you are signaling a program, we encourage you to describe it in the personal statement.

Q Do I need to signal my home program or programs where I have or am planning to complete a visiting elective or away rotation if I am strongly interested?

A Yes, you should signal any program where you want to express a strong interest. If this includes your home program or a program where you have or plan to rotate, a signal should be sent to that program. Faculty advisors at these institutions are also advised to tell students to signal their program if they are strongly interested.

Q Are there recommendations for how to use my signals?

A You should signal the 15 programs where you want to communicate your heightened interest. The decision of which programs to signal should be tailored to your individual needs and preferences. Consult with your advisors on how best to strategically use your signals. Relevant factors may include personal or family needs, career goals, geographic preferences, and the relative competitiveness of the applicant. The 2025–2026 ophthalmology match cycle post-rank list deadline survey of ophthalmology residency applicants found that the top factors applicants considered when deciding which programs to signal (in decreasing order) were geographic location, alignment with career goals, personal or family considerations, program reputation, likelihood of matching based on past applicant data, and program size and resources.

Q Do I need to confirm that a program has received my signal?

A No, when you submit your application with your assigned signals, the signals will automatically be delivered to the programs.

Q Are programs allowed to advise me to send or not send them a signal?

A Programs advising applicants not to signal that they are interested in the program are not allowed. Even if you think a program knows of your heightened interest, you should signal it if it is among the top 15 programs of interest.

Q Will applicants who signaled a program be ranked higher on the final rank list than those who did not?

A Each program will incorporate these signals into its selection process differently. How applicants are ranked on the final rank list will be at each program's discretion. A survey of 71 ophthalmology program directors prior to the 2024 match cycle (the first year of signals) found that 89% of programs planned to incorporate signals into the application review process, with the majority planning to use signals earlier (63%) rather than later (25%) in the process.

Q Will programs tell us how they plan to use the signals they receive (for example, post their plan for using signals on a website), or can we call to inquire?

A Programs may choose to publicize how they will use their signals, but it is not mandatory. Be mindful that this process is still relatively new. Many programs do not yet know how they will use the increased number of signals this match cycle, and that may continue to change throughout the process. We do not recommend contacting programs to ask how they intend to use their signals. We encourage any program that has definitively decided not to use signals in its selection process to make that information easily accessible to applicants.