

## Medical Scribe

I picked a piece of lint off my leggings and surveyed the hospital lobby inundated with anxious pre-medical students overdressed for a medical scribing information session. Some of the males wore ties; those who didn't compensated with drab, oversized blazers with sleeves that dwarfed their watch-covered wrists. The females stood in skirts and Portofino shirts and fully made-up faces. I was the lone exception to the room's unspoken dress code, the only pre-med not wearing a professional outfit that barely fit my gangly body. Something had gone horribly wrong.

I unlocked my phone and skimmed through the email again:

*Are you applying and/or planning to apply to medical school? ScribeUSA is the country's fastest-growing medical scribing program. We train intelligent, friendly, and tech-minded candidates to quickly and accurately record details of patient encounters in a variety of clinical settings. Here are just a few of the many benefits of working as a scribe:*

- *Learn the ins and outs of the healthcare system!*
- *Get paid to shadow a real physician!*
- *Gain knowledge of medical terminology!*
- *Perform medical procedures! \**

*\*subject to placement and level of training*

Below the description was a list of information sessions with corresponding times and locations. I scrolled through a series of photographs of smiling students wearing scrubs and white coats and stethoscopes. An italicized quote peppered with key phrases like “scribing changed the way I see medicine” and “scribing is for everyone thinking about applying to medical school” accompanied each photo. The quotes and the student photos could have been jumbled and rearranged so the quotes no longer matched the student, but the content wouldn’t have changed, and no one would have noticed. We were willing to pursue any semblance of a competitive edge for our med school applications, which opened only three months and two days from now. I pictured my parents telling friends and relatives about me: Clara’s going to be a doctor someday.

My heart sputtered when I reached the end of the email: *We will conduct on-site interviews for interested students after the meeting. Dress code is business casual.*

I stared at the exit and contemplated the walk back to my apartment. I knew I couldn’t leave. Scribing was the pinnacle gap year position for most pre-med students; ScribeUSA was the only program on campus that offered paid opportunities at the hospital. During that—hopefully—single year between graduation and acceptance into medical school, scribes became familiar with medical jargon while learning how to communicate with healthcare providers. Scribes departed their experiences with a plethora of high-yield clinical stories that could be adapted and wielded during medical school interviews.

The minuscule flecks of lint on my leggings, so trivial a minute ago, now felt like flashing strobe lights alerting everyone in the lobby to my presence.

Maybe I could borrow someone’s blazer—just for the interview.

A soft chime from the elevator doors at the end of the lobby forced a rippling hush across the room. Our ScribeUSA representative stepped through the parted elevator doors. Her labored breathing accompanied a thin rim of sweat that had formed on her forehead. The bottom of her name badge, emblazoned with the ScribeUSA logo, read *Nancy*.

Nancy mumbled to herself as she scratched at her clipboard with a pen that had a chewed cap. Her eyes darted up and down the clipboard. She paused a moment to catch her breath before she examined the seats in the lobby, each seat occupied by a pre-med in formal attire.

“Let’s see if we can’t fit into both these elevators here,” she finally said.

Nancy lumbered backwards into the nearest elevator. We followed in waves, shuffling and rearranging ourselves to protect blazers and blouses from pre-interview wrinkles. Most of us knew each other from class or research or medical school admissions sessions. Most of us planned to submit this upcoming cycle, while the rest would delay a year or two. A significant minority of us would never be accepted to medical school.

A distressingly garrulous pair of boys stood talking about electromagnetism in the middle of the elevator. Their oblivious chatter reminded me of how I hadn’t studied for the biochemistry midterm all day—minus the hour and a half of flash cards early this morning. I was also behind on organizing for the Red Cross blood drive next week, not to mention the literature review I was supposed to email to my professor by tomorrow night so we could begin drafting an abstract for the upcoming symposium.

I imagined telling my parents, who already envisioned me working at the hospital, that I was no longer pre-med. Even if they accepted my decision, who would I be if not the same, apprehensive student more comfortable in a study cubicle than any other location on campus? I was a pre-medical student and I didn't know how to be anything else.

Nancy handed each of us a ScribeUSA folder as we stepped out of the elevator and into the 5<sup>th</sup> floor lobby. An ethnically ambiguous semicircle of students wearing white coats smiled at me below the company's now-familiar red, white, and blue logo. Their wide-eyed expressions reminded me of obligatory photos taken of me posing in front of research posters and student org displays.

I joined the jumble of students standing at the periphery of the conference room.

"Did everyone get a folder?" Nancy asked, inhaling sharply as she held up the remaining pile of smiling scribes. No one answered.

"Alright," she continued. "If you didn't get one, I'll leave them here for you." She set the folders down in front of her at the head of the table, several feet away from the nearest student.

"Let me tell you a little bit about myself," Nancy huffed, and then gestured to a pair of shadowy ScribeUSA reps standing behind her, "as well as the two wonderful folks on either side of me." "My name's Nancy. I started at ScribeUSA, same as where all of you would be starting. I worked for three months over at the VA hospital, and then I got promoted to lead scribe, just like that. A few months later and now I'm a regional rep for ScribeUSA. I'm telling you all this not to brag or anything, but to show we're a fast-growing company with a lot of employment opportunities and room for advancement."

Nancy motioned to a representative wearing a navy blazer, V-Neck shirt, and jeans. "Our president here, Jared Shannon, also started out as a scribe." She then motioned to the other representative, a younger woman wearing hoary black eyeshadow and flakes of mascara that streaked across her wrinkled purple scrubs. "Sabrina is working as a scribe as she finishes her master's in public health at Southern Michigan University." Sabrina's shoulders sagged slightly even as she smiled blankly at the room.

"ScribeUSA was founded by one physician and one scribe here at the University of Ohio," said Nancy. The slideshow at the front of the room advanced to a photo of a smiling student standing next to a physician, both sets of teeth bleached white.

"The physician realized he wanted more time to interact with his patients without having to stare at his computer and type the entire visit. Thus, ScribeUSA was born. Now we're the fastest growing scribing company in the United States." Nancy paused, partly for dramatic effect, partly to catch her breath. The beads of sweat on her forehead had metastasized to her neck and now clung precariously in place as hearty bulbs of translucent fluid.

"One thing that sets us apart from other companies is that we pay you for your training, and after a few months of work, you're eligible to receive a small pay raise right away. Now, although we offer both part-time and full-time positions," Nancy began. She paused for dramatic effect, and possibly to catch her breath. "If you work for us part-time, we ask that you commit to two years. We put a lot of time and resources into training our scribes."

Nancy clicked through the slides. Some slides lasted longer than others. None of them were properly formatted to fit the updated dimensions of the presentation

software. I pictured myself working as a full-time scribe for a year, standing behind a computer and smiling when patients thanked us for treating them.

that I was already working at the hospital and soon I would be working there as a physician.

Nancy clicked to the next slide. She paused a moment to catch her breath. The air halted in her lungs and she coughed. Sputum blanketed the air in front of her and fell softly to the table. Nancy quickly and instinctively lunged towards the bottle of moisturizing hand sanitizer on the table. She squirted a generous dollop onto her hands and rubbed the luminous liquid between her fingers.

A lone student raised his hand. "I'm double majoring in neuroscience and international relations and I don't have a lot of extra free time," he said, "so I was just wondering if we could choose where we're placed."

"Excellent question," Nancy smiled, one hand using a napkin to wipe away thin rivulets of sweat that had begun to trickle down both sides of her face. "During your one-on-one consultation with either me or Sabrina, you'll be able to specify things like whether you'll be able to travel, your availability, and whether you want to work full time or part-time. Based on that, we'll let you know which position we have for you, and you

can choose to either accept or decline the position from there. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," the student nodded. "It does."

"Any other questions?"

A slew of hands rose towards the ceiling. Nancy stared at the tangle of appendages as a biologist would cast a wary eye at an infected incubator. Her chest rose once, twice, three times in the span of a couple of seconds. Her hair splayed across her face, stuck firmly to the skin by the sweat coursing through her pores. Her lips formed the beginning of an answer, but her voice caught suddenly in her throat, forcing her to stop and collect herself before starting again.

"Yes, how about you," she called out to a student sitting with her back straight against the conference table chair. The student's makeup was immaculate, and she held copies of her resume in front of her. I was thankful for students like her, who would ultimately choose an overseas research fellowship over a position with ScribeUSA, whose safety schools consisted of lower-tier Ivy League universities.

"Thank you for your excellent presentation," the student began. I could tell her question would follow a traditional three-act structure. "You said that there is a significant pay increase after a few months of work and that there is a lot of opportunity for advancement at this company." There was the body of the question. "So," she continued, drawing in a quick breath for the conclusion, "If we're only here for a gap year, are we still able to get promoted that quickly?"

Nancy stifled a flummoxed expression with a stuttering staccato of filler words. "Well, you see," she stammered. "We don't normally offer a lot of advancement opportunities

to gap year students. There's no reason to promote you if you're just going to leave, right?" No one answered her rhetorical question.

Nancy contorted her jowls into a fatigued smile. "Does that answer your question?"

"Yes," the student said. "It does," she nodded. "Thank you."

Again, the tangle of hands and arms rose up towards the ceiling. Nancy reached forward and braced herself against the table with one hand. Her chest wall expanded and retracted with the rhythm of a vital organ marching towards massive soft tissue death. While she continued to field questions from students, the quantity of raised hands never seemed to decrease. I even raised my hand at one point. Each time Nancy called on a student, she locked eyes with them and nodded and invited them to ask their question with eyes that pleaded for clemency. When the student finished and the responsibility of an answer fell to Nancy, she reached for a new tissue and wiped the incessant flow of sweat from her brow.

Sabrina and Jared clung to the periphery of the room, unwilling to intervene or offer additional insight into the program. They watched as students slung questions at Nancy, and did nothing as their words battered her, as the barrage of voices needled through her skull.

The questions began to echo my father's dinner table interrogations—what was I taking this semester? Have I started a spreadsheet of medical schools? Why am I wasting my time with yearbook club? Nancy's perspiratory antics mirrored my internal turmoil as I struggled to retain the measure in my voice. Unlike Nancy, however, I never betrayed any emotion.

As Nancy's shoulders sank under the weight of each question, the line of moist tissues continued to grow along the table surface. My paralyzing helplessness rooted me to my sliver of conference room wall, where I recycled old memories of anxiety as I sat for organic chemistry exams in overwhelming lecture halls.

"That's going to have to be the last question," Nancy said finally. "Let me go to the bathroom really quick, and then we'll get started with the interviews."

Nancy fled the room. Jared and Sabrina remained at their posts, unmoving, until Nancy came back, refreshed and glistening. The result of a few handfuls of water splashed onto her face.

She smiled at us. "Jared, Sabrina, and I will each take one of you for a one-on-one consultation. As soon as you're finished with the interview, you're free to leave. Does anyone want to volunteer?"

Most hands rose, including mine. Sabrina and Jared stepped forward from the shadows to accompany Nancy, who seemed to quiver slightly at the sight of so many swaying limbs. Jared pointed at one pre-med, an All-American type wearing a football tie, and they clapped each other on the back before exiting the room. I avoided Nancy's eyes, and her selection fell on the student who asked three-part questions. Sabrina and I made eye contact with each other. "I'll take you," she managed. I stood up and followed her out into the hallway and into an adjacent conference room.

Oversized windows lined one wall of the room, offering a panoramic view of the University of Ohio's expansive campus. The jilted collection of city lights flashing against the setting sun tempted me to pull out my phone for a picture.

Sabrina seemed not to notice the view. She plodded across the room to the larger of two chairs pulled away from the conference table and plopped onto its fading seat cushion.

“Before you begin,” I began.

I paused. Sabrina looked at me, waiting for an answer. Her face held the vacant stare of a person who could wait eternally for a response.

“I didn’t know you would be doing interviews today,” I said. “So, I didn’t dress up or anything. I thought this was just going to be an information session.”

“It is,” said Sabrina as a spurt of confusion materialized in her eyes. “This isn’t the actual interview. This is an informal interview to see if we extend you an interview offer.”

I nodded as if I understood her ambiguous answer.

“Why do you want to be a scribe?” she asked.

Every original thought at the forefront of my mind dissipated in an instant.

I took a shallow breath to spare myself another half second of time before I had to convince her and all of ScribeUSA that I deserved an interview. I conjured an image of my mother in Sabrina’s place. My mother, who sat with a furrowed brow in the living room and waited for me to tell her why I wanted to be a doctor. “I’m a fourth-year pre-medical student planning to take a gap year after graduating this spring and I’m looking for a clinical experience to help me transition to medical school,” I said.

Sabrina nodded and scribbled onto the pad of paper attached to her clipboard. She didn’t recognize my words as the same short introduction I had emailed out to a hundred physicians last month when I was looking for shadowing experience. The truth was that I had no real idea why I wanted to be a scribe. I had no idea why I wanted to

be a doctor, either. I only knew that since I was here, sitting in this room, pre-interviewing for a scribing position, I had to outperform my classmates, prove both to them and to myself that I deserved a seat in medical school.

“Tell me about a time you overcame a challenge,” Sabrina said.

I waited a few seconds, as if forming an impromptu response to her question. In reality, I had already prepared all of my medical school application essays, and I had long ago crafted a response to this standard question. Sabrina scribbled on her clipboard as I told her about volunteering at a free clinic in Costa Rica last summer. She never looked up, even when I told her about watching my first delivery in a foreign operating room. Her hand only wavered in frantic circular motions across the clipboard as I described the exhilaration I felt at scaling jungle peaks to deliver medical supplies. There was barely a flicker in her drooping eyes when I mentioned passing out food to smiling families in our mountainside clinic. Finally, my answer spiraled gracefully to conclusion, and Sabrina only slumped lower in her chair.

“That’s quite a story,” Sabrina said when she realized I had stopped speaking. “Can you talk about how your education will benefit your ability to scribe?”

Sabrina proceeded through her list of mundane questions. As we progressed, and Sabrina’s jittering hand became more sporadic, I realized that she was not, in fact, taking notes at all, but only passing the time until my pre-interview ended so she could dismiss me and leave to fetch the next potential applicant.

“Can I ask you one question?” I asked after I completed my last concise response. Sabrina set her clipboard down on her lap and stared in my direction. “Sure,” she said.

“What are the hours like?” I said. “Can you scribe while taking classes?”

Sabrina hesitated. Her mouth opened, but no sound escaped. She raised her clipboard against her chest as if to shield herself against me before she replied. “You can,” she said hesitantly. “I’m going to school and working as a scribe and I still get plenty of sleep. You won’t have a problem as long as you prioritize.”

I nodded.

“Do you have any more questions?” she asked.

Of course I had questions. I wanted to know how to prioritize my schedule and study efficiently enough to sleep more than five hours a night. I wanted to ask her if she was applying for medical school this cycle, and if so, which schools so that I could avoid applying to those same schools. I wanted her to lean forward and whisper into my ear all the untold secrets of performing well at medical school interviews.

I shook my head.

On my way out I watched Nancy clasp her chest with one hand as she led a student to another conference room. The student explained how he was majoring in neuroscience and volunteered at the children’s hospital every other week. If we both worked for ScribeUSA then we would have three things in common—four if we got accepted to the same medical school.

Why did I want to be a doctor? Because that’s what I told family and friends and anyone else who asked. Because my pre-health advisor and research mentors had already written me letters of recommendation. Because if I worked as a scribe, I wouldn’t have to get a real job until I entered a residency program. I wanted to be a doctor because I was already applying to medical school.