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CLINICAL EXPOSURE

A Professional Guide to Dental Shadowing

How to prepare, observe respectfully, protect patient privacy, understand the team, reflect meaningfully, and follow up.

Prepared by Andrew Gallos, M.S., D.M.D. Candidate, Class of 2028

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GUIDE OVERVIEW

What this guide covers

How to prepare, observe respectfully, protect patient privacy, understand the team, reflect meaningfully, and follow up.

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Educational guidance only. Admissions requirements, testing policies, and timelines can change. Always verify requirements with ADEA, the ADA, and each dental school before acting. PDI is not affiliated with or endorsed by ADEA or the ADA.

SECTION 01

What shadowing is - and is not

Shadowing is observation of a dentist and dental team in a clinical setting. It helps you understand the work, test your career assumptions, and reflect more specifically on dentistry.

- You are an observer, not a clinical team member. Do not provide care, handle instruments, or represent yourself as trained staff.
- Shadowing expectations vary by dental school. Research each target program instead of assuming one universal hour requirement.
- Meaningful continuity and reflection matter more than collecting hours without understanding.
- General dentistry is an important foundation; specialist or community settings can broaden perspective when available.
- A patient may decline to have an observer present. Accept that immediately and without taking it personally.

SECTION 02

Before the visit

Confirm the office's expectations directly. Practices differ in dress, parking, identification, arrival, paperwork, and where observers may stand.

- Confirm the date, arrival time, location, contact person, and expected length of the visit.
- Ask whether the office prefers business-casual attire or scrubs. Wear closed-toe shoes and avoid fragrance, dangling accessories, and clothing that interferes with clinical safety.
- Bring identification and complete any confidentiality or office paperwork requested.
- Keep your phone silenced and stored. Never photograph, record, or post about patients or the office without explicit authorization.
- Prepare a few thoughtful questions, but expect to ask them only when the dentist or team indicates an appropriate time.

SECTION 03

Patient privacy and professional boundaries

Patient trust comes first. Follow the practice's privacy instructions and treat every detail you observe as confidential.

- Do not record names, birth dates, appointment times, images, diagnoses, or combinations of details that could identify a patient.
- Do not discuss cases with friends, classmates, or on social media.
- Let the dentist or team introduce you and obtain any permission required by the practice.
- Do not ask a patient personal questions, comment on treatment, or offer reassurance unless invited and supervised.
- If you are unsure whether something is appropriate, stop and ask the designated team member privately.

> PDI note: Keep reflection notes de-identified and write them after leaving the clinical area, unless the office gives different instructions.

SECTION 04

Understand the dental team and workflow

A dental visit depends on coordinated clinical and administrative work. Observe how roles connect rather than focusing only on the dentist's hands.

- Front office: scheduling, insurance communication, patient arrival, financial coordination, and continuity.
- Dental assistants: room preparation, four-handed support, imaging within scope, materials, patient support, and turnover.
- Dental hygienists: prevention, periodontal assessment and therapy, education, and long-term maintenance within state scope.
- Dentist: diagnosis, treatment planning, procedures, informed consent, communication, documentation, and team leadership.
- Sterilization and infection control: instrument processing, surface disinfection, personal protective equipment, and defined clean/dirty workflows.

SECTION 05

Procedures you may observe

What you see depends on the practice and schedule. Use these descriptions as orientation, not as clinical instruction.

- Examination and imaging: history, clinical findings, radiographs, diagnosis, risk assessment, and treatment planning.

- Preventive and periodontal care: hygiene assessment, scaling, polishing when indicated, fluoride, and home-care education.
- Composite restoration: anesthesia as indicated, isolation, caries removal/preparation, adhesive steps, placement, shaping, and occlusal adjustment.
- Crown treatment: tooth preparation and either a conventional impression or digital scan; the restoration may be lab-made or produced in-office, with a temporary when needed.
- Endodontic treatment: access, cleaning and shaping, irrigation, and obturation; treatment may be completed in one or more visits.
- Extraction or implant surgery: local anesthesia is commonly used, with surgical approach and sterile technique determined by the procedure and patient.

SECTION 06

How to observe well

Position yourself where the team directs, stay aware of movement and infection-control zones, and notice both clinical reasoning and communication.

- Do not touch instruments, trays, cabinets, computers, radiographic equipment, or clinical surfaces unless specifically directed.
- Avoid blocking the assistant, light, suction, doorway, or access to supplies.
- Save nonurgent questions for transitions or breaks; urgent clinical communication belongs to the team.
- Notice how the dentist explains options, checks understanding, responds to anxiety, and coordinates with staff.
- Observe the less visible work: reviewing images, writing notes, managing time, handling complications, and following up.

SECTION 07

Questions worth asking

Ask questions that deepen your understanding of the profession and the dentist's path. The best question often begins with something you observed that day.

- What originally drew you to dentistry, and what has kept you in it?
- What part of the job is most different from what you expected as a student?
- How do you approach a patient who is anxious or uncertain about treatment?
- How do you decide when to treat, monitor, refer, or present alternatives?

- What should a pre-dental student pay attention to during undergraduate study and the application process?
- How have technology, materials, staffing, or practice ownership changed your work?

SECTION 08

Reflection, logging, and follow-up

Turn observation into learning while protecting privacy. A strong reflection is about insight, not a list of procedures.

- Log the date, dentist, practice type, general setting, and verified hours according to your application system's instructions.
- Write de-identified reflections: what surprised you, what skill you noticed, what question remains, and how the experience affected your understanding.
- Send a concise thank-you message to the dentist and team, ideally within a day or two.
- Do not assume one visit creates an ongoing commitment; ask respectfully whether future observation is possible.
- Use what you learned to evaluate dentistry honestly, not simply to manufacture an essay story.

REFERENCES

Official sources

These sources were reviewed when this guide was prepared. Re-check them for updates before applying or registering for an exam.

ADEA shadowing guidance
https://www.adea.org/godental/Apply/tips-for-preparing-to-enter-dental-school/preparing-for-dental-school/shadowing

ADEA shadowing opportunities and professional etiquette
https://www.adea.org/GoDental/health-professions-advisors/supporting-students/shadowing-opportunities

HHS HIPAA Privacy Rule overview
https://www.hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/privacy/index.html

CDC summary of infection prevention practices in dental settings
https://www.cdc.gov/dental-infection-control/hcp/summary/index.html

Make shadowing meaningful

PDI Academy Chicago is planned for 2028. Timing and program details may change. Join the interest list for future program announcements, or ask the PDI team for application guidance today.

Explore application mentorship at predentalinstituteofchicago.com

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