

How You Can Avoid the Kisses of Death in the Graduate School Application Process

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Numerous authors offer advice about what you *should do* to gain admission to graduate programs. However, few authors advise you about what you *should not do* or support their “should-nots” with data. We surveyed the chairs of 457 graduate admissions committees in psychology about the contents of applications of otherwise strong candidates (i.e., those with high grades and test scores) that *decreased* their chances for acceptance (i.e., kisses of death or KODs; Appleby & Appleby, 2006). A qualitative analysis of these surveys yielded five major categories of KODs. Although these KODs reflect applicants’ unwise choices, we believe many of them resulted from a lack of appropriate advising and mentoring. This handout was created to help you avoid these KODs in the graduate school application process.

Damaging Personal Statements

You may mistakenly interpret the request for a personal statement at face value, as a chance to share personal (i.e., private) information with the graduate admissions committee. However, the real purpose of a personal statement is to provide you with an opportunity to address issues such as research interests and perceived fit with the program to which you are applying. Therefore,

- Avoid providing excessively self-revealing information. Faculty may interpret such information as a sign you are unaware of the value of interpersonal or professional boundaries in sensitive areas.
- Avoid excessively altruistic statements (e.g., “I just want to help people.”). Graduate faculty could interpret these statements to mean you believe a strong need to help others is more important to your success in graduate school than your desire to perform research and engage in other academic and professional activities.
- Avoid inappropriate humor, attempts to appear cute or clever, and references to God or religious issues when these issues are unrelated to the program to which you are applying. Admissions committee members may interpret this type of information to mean you lack awareness of the formal nature of the application process or the culture of graduate school.

Flawed Letters of Recommendation

You may think a letter of recommendation should come from a person who knows you well and can vouch for your admirable traits and strong values (a family member or member of the clergy), but admissions committees are interested in objective sources who are familiar with your academic qualifications. Therefore,

- Avoid letters of recommendation from people who do not know you well, whose portrayals of your characteristics may not be objective (e.g., a relative), or who are unable to base their descriptions in an academic context (e.g., your minister). Letters from these authors can give the impression you are unable or unwilling to solicit letters from individuals whose depictions are accurate, objective, or professionally relevant.
- Avoid letters from people who will provide unflattering descriptions of your personal or academic characteristics. These descriptions provide a clear warning that you are not suited for graduate study.
- Choose your letter of recommendation authors carefully. Do not simply ask potential authors if they are willing to write you a letter of recommendation; ask them if they are able to write you a *strong* letter of recommendation. This question will allow them to decline your request diplomatically if they believe their letter may be more harmful than helpful.

Lack of Information About the Program to Which You Are Applying

- Avoid statements that reflect a generic approach to the application process or an unfamiliarity with the program to which you are applying. These statements signal you have not made an honest effort to learn whether you are a good fit for their program. Avoid statements that indicate you and the target program are a perfect fit if these statements are not corroborated with specific evidence that supports your assertion (e.g., your research interests are similar to those of the program’s faculty). Graduate faculty can interpret a lack of this evidence as a sign that you and the program to which you are applying are not a good match.

Poor Writing Skills

- Avoid spelling or grammatical errors in your application. These errors are an unmistakable warning of substandard writing skills, a refusal to proofread your work, or your willingness to submit careless written work.
- Avoid writing in an unclear, disorganized, or unconvincing manner that does not provide your readers with a coherent picture of your research, educational, and professional goals. A crucial part of your graduate training will be writing; do not communicate your inability to write to those you hope will be evaluating your writing in the future.
- It is certainly unethical to have another person write any or all of your personal statement. However, it is not only wise, but highly appropriate, to seek feedback on the quality of your letter from a trusted professional (e.g., your mentor, advisor, or research supervisor).

Misfired Attempts to Impress

- Avoid attempts to impress the members of a graduate admissions committee with information they may interpret as insincere flattery (e.g., referring to the target program in an excessively complimentary manner) or inappropriate (e.g., namedropping or blaming others for poor academic performance). Graduate faculty are familiar with these unwise strategies, so it is best to avoid them in your application.

Reference

Appleby, D. C., & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology, 33*, 19-24. doi: 10.1207/s15328023top3301_5