

How to Avoid the
Kisses of Death
**in the Graduate School
Application Process**

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Study Rationale

- ❑ Many publications offer psychology majors suggestions about *what they should do* when they apply to graduate school.
- ❑ Few offer advice about *what they should NOT do.*
- ❑ We collected empirical data from the people who make the actual decisions about who will and who will not be accepted into psychology graduate programs—**the chairpersons of graduate school admissions committees.**



Study Purpose

- ❑ Collect examples of **kisses of death in graduate school applications** that had prevented otherwise strong candidates from being admitted into the psychology graduate programs of their choice.
- ❑ Provide our findings to psychology faculty so they could help their students avoid these kisses in their graduate school applications.



Data Collection

- We sent letters to the chairpersons of the graduate admissions committees of all 457 programs listed in *APA's Graduate Programs in Psychology**.

*Masters and doctoral level programs were not differentiated in the data collection for this study.

- These letters stated:
 - “Please provide us with a brief description of one or two examples of things that otherwise strong applicants to your program included in their application materials that caused your admissions committee members to draw less positive conclusions about them than if they had not included these “kisses of death.”



Data Analysis

- We performed a qualitative analysis of the 88 responses we received by:
 - Identifying the central concepts in each of their responses.
 - Comparing, contrasting, and combining these concepts into major themes and their constituent subthemes.



Major Themes

1. Damaging personal statements (53)*
2. Flawed letters of recommendation (45)
3. Not doing your homework (22)
4. Lack of writing skills (21)

The number in parenthesis after each theme is the number of examples of this theme given by our 88 respondents.



Minor Themes . . .

1. Misfired attempts to impress (6)
2. Academic problems (3)
3. The “Maternal” Kiss of Death (1)



This Presentation Provides Our Findings in the Form of

- ❑ Themes and their Subthemes
- ❑ Direct quotations from the chairpersons of the graduate admissions committees who responded to our survey letter



Major Theme #1: Damaging Personal Statements

- Subthemes
 - Excessively Altruistic Personal Statements
 - Excessive Self-Disclosure
 - Nonspecific Research Goals
 - Professional Inappropriateness

Excessively Altruistic Personal Statements



- ❑ “I’m destined to save the world.”
- ❑ “I want to help all people live happy lives.”
- ❑ “I want to help people because of how very much I have been helped.”

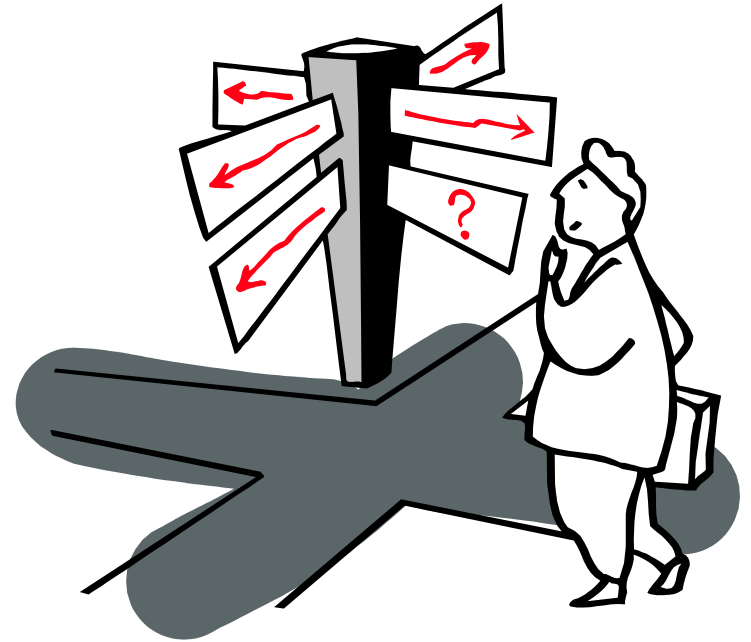


Excessive Self-Disclosure

- “Personal problems or therapy disclosure is a kiss of death. It is unacceptable when students highlight how they were drawn into graduate study because of a significant personal problem or trauma.”
- “Way too much honesty. Making personal statements REALLY personal. ‘Being a recovering drug addict daughter of a sexually deviant and alcoholic mother has given me profound insights into the field of psychology.’”

Non-Specific or No Research Goals

“Statements like ‘I’m open to any area of research’ or ‘I love all of psychology’ are statements that show no focus on a specific area.”





Non-Specific or No Research Goals

- “If a person is applying to a clinical program, they should not list one of their reasons for going the clinical route as being their lack of interest in doing research.”

For Example . . .

- “Although I understand the value of research, my real interests lie in working with people with clinical problems. My primary interests are in getting trained in clinical skills rather than research.”

Professional Inappropriateness



Avoid “Cutesy/clever stuff”

- “[We] received a statement of purpose labeled ‘Statement of Porpoise’ that contained drawings of this sea creature and a description of [the applicant] frolicking in the ocean with one on a visit to Florida.”



Professional Inappropriateness

Avoid information that is not professionally relevant:

- ❑ “References to God—being religious is ok, but it has little relevance to research or psychology graduate school.”



Professional Inappropriateness

Avoid information that makes it seem as if graduate school is not your priority:

- ❑ “I am applying to your Ph.D. program because I ran out of funds for touring Europe with my band and doctoral studies seem to be the next logical step in my development as an adult. An otherwise OUTSTANDING applicant rejected outright.”



Major Theme #2:

Flawed Letters of Recommendation

- Subthemes
 - Inappropriate Authors
 - Undesirable Personality
Characteristics Mentioned

Inappropriate Authors



“We once received a very positive letter of recommendation telling about the applicant’s good character and work habits. Unfortunately we couldn’t use it because it was from her mother.”



Inappropriate Authors

- “The biggest KOD is having your therapist write a letter about you . . . no matter how positive the letter is.”
- “A letter of recommendation written by the applicant about himself.”



Inappropriate Authors

“The applicant had a letter that began, X asked me to write a letter of recommendation for her. She informed me that she took my class last semester. I’ll have to take her word for it; I don’t remember her. If she was in my class, she did nothing to distinguish herself from the other students. Needless to say, I can’t comment on her qualifications.”



Inappropriate Authors

“Letters of recommendation from professors that include spelling and grammatical errors. This makes us wonder whether or not good writing skills are taught at his/her undergraduate institution.”

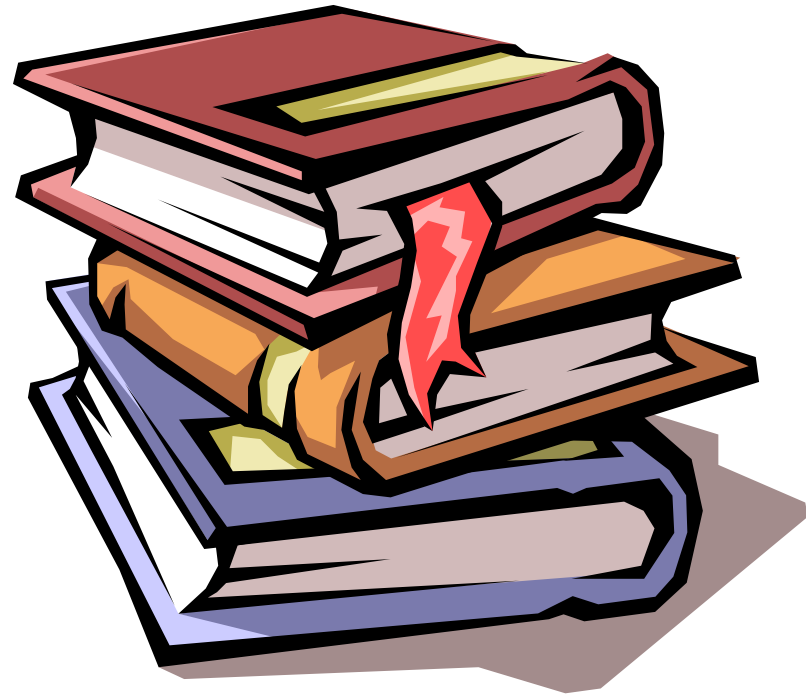


Undesirable Personality Characteristics Mentioned

- ❑ “Perfectionist”
- ❑ “Painfully shy”
- ❑ “Immature”
- ❑ “Unstable”
- ❑ “Underachiever”
- ❑ “Bright, but sensitive to criticism”
- ❑ “Significant problems with procrastination”
- ❑ “John is learning to let others have their opinions.”
- ❑ “Not a team player”
- ❑ “Communication in English is not usually a problem.”
- ❑ “Extremely efficient when she comes to class.”
- ❑ “His personal hygiene has improved.”

Major Theme #3: Not Doing Your Homework

“A mismatch of interests between the student and the department faculty. When it is clear that the student has not done his/her homework in selecting programs which match their interests; that’s a kiss of death.”





Not Doing Your Homework

“Failure to read program information—sometimes students note that they wish to work in an area we don’t offer or with a faculty member who has relocated, retired, or died.”



Not Doing Your Homework

“During a phone interview, a student confused our training program with not just another school, but with another profession. When corrected, she asserted that *we* were wrong.”



Not Doing Your Homework

“Statement that the program is ‘just perfect’ without evidence that the applicant knows much about the program. The applicant should do homework on each program and know specific activities and faculty.”



Major Theme #4: Lack of Writing Skills

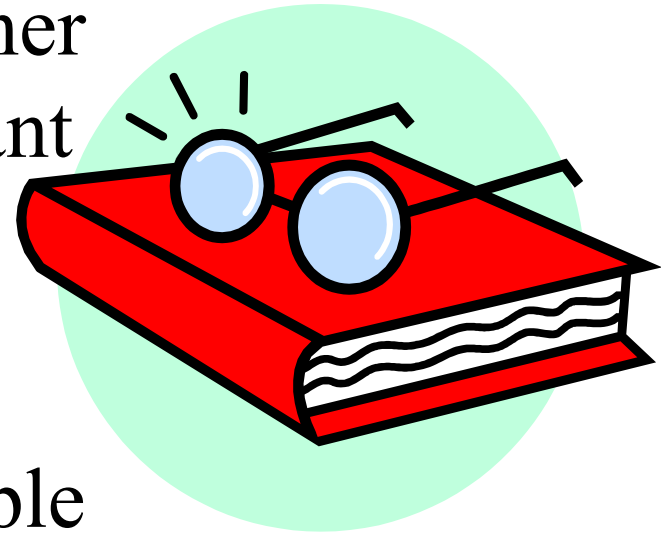
- Subthemes

- Failure to Proofread

- Handwritten Applications

Failure to Proofread

- ❑ “Applications that are poorly written, have misspellings, or other careless mistakes take an applicant out of the running.”
- ❑ “Poor grammar, misspellings, whiteouts, lack of structure. People getting their doctorate should already know how to write.”





Failure to Proofread

“Spelling and grammar are taken **VERY** seriously here. One of last year’s decisions to deny admission to any applicant was the misspelling of our university’s name.”



Handwritten Applications

- ❑ “Don’t handwrite the application . . . it sends a message that is not professional. Type everything you send.”
- ❑ “A handwritten application is an immediate kiss of death for me.”



Minor Theme #1: Misfired Attempts to Impress

“I received a statement of purpose that began, ‘I’ve never really enjoyed the company of other students. I much prefer talking to my professors.’ This applicant was trying to tell us that he’s super intelligent and mature. But we inferred that he doesn’t get along with his peers and that he is most comfortable following his professors around.”



Misfired Attempts to Impress

“In student bio statements, they elaborate on their family work history in the area of psychology or mental health and/or name drop some recognized practitioner without any substantive evidence of having any real connection.”



Misfired Attempts to Impress

“A student wrote a six or seven page biographical statement when the application form clearly requested a one or two page statement.”

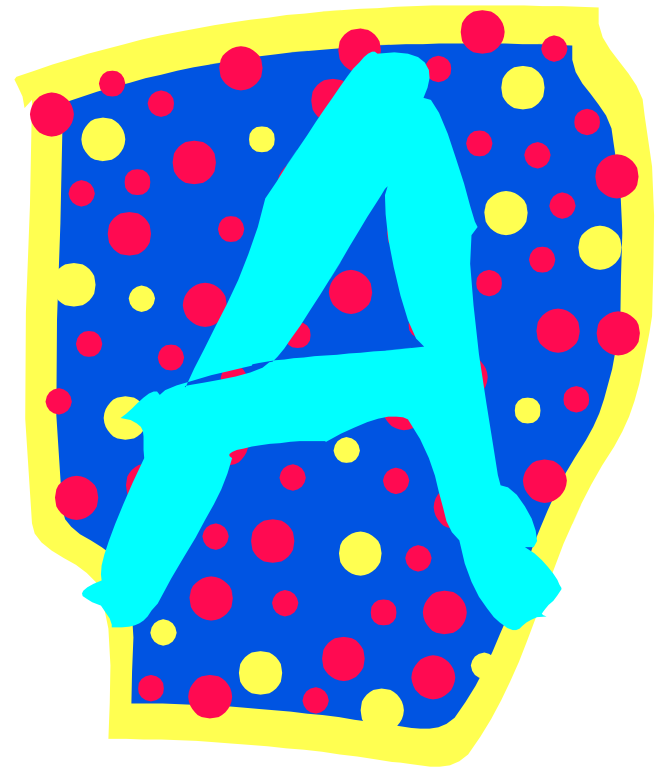


Minor Theme #2: Academic Problems

- Subthemes
 - Erratic Grades
 - Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance

Erratic Grades

- ❑ “Highly variable academic performance”
- ❑ “Erratic grades and many dropped courses”





Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance

“My undergraduate program was really bad because of x, y, and z. I didn’t really learn anything, so I’m applying to your program so that I will actually learn something.”

**A Kiss of Death Can Also
Come from the Person**

who You Least Expect . . .

YOUR MOTHER!



Minor Theme #3:

The “Maternal” Kiss of Death

“An applicant’s mother called to request applications be sent to her immediately so she and her son could work on them over winter break. When told the deadline was several months away, the mother replied, *if we don’t work on them while he’s home, he’ll never get them done!*”



In Conclusion

Here is specific advice about how to avoid the kisses of death we identified.



Personal Statements

What to Avoid	References to your mental health	Excessively altruistic statements	Excessively self-revealing information	Professionally inappropriate elements
How this KOD may be interpreted	You may be unable to function as a successful graduate student.	Your need to help others is more important than your desire to perform research and engage in other academic and professional activities.	You are unaware of the value of interpersonal or professional boundaries in sensitive areas.	You lack an awareness of the formal nature of the application process and/or the culture of graduate school.



Letters of Recommendation

What to Avoid	Inappropriate authors (i.e., those lacking objectivity or the ability to discuss your academic potential)	Authors who may provide unflattering descriptions of your behaviors or characteristics
How this KOD may be interpreted	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.	These descriptions provide a clear warning that you are not suited for graduate study.

Note: Do not ask potential authors if they will write you a letter of recommendation; ask if they are able to write you a strong letter of recommendation. This question allows them to diplomatically decline your request if they believe their letter may be more harmful than helpful and then recommend someone whose letter will be more effective.



Lack of Program Information

What to Avoid

Statements reflecting a generic approach to the application process or an unfamiliarity with the program to which you are applying

Statements indicating you and the target program are a perfect fit if these statements are not supported with specific evidence that substantiates your assertion

How this KOD may be interpreted

You have not made an honest effort to learn about the program from which you are saying you want to earn your graduate degree.

You and the program to which you are applying may not be a good match.



Poor Writing Skills

What to Avoid

Spelling or grammatical errors in your application

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

How this KOD may be interpreted

You possess substandard writing skills, you refuse to proofread your work, or you are willing to submit careless written work.

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.



Misfired Attempts to Impress

What to Avoid	Avoid attempts to impress admissions committees with information they may interpret as insincere (e.g., referring to their program in an excessively complimentary manner) or inappropriate (e.g., name-dropping or blaming others for poor academic performance).
How this KOD may be interpreted	These attempts will come across as devious or unrelated to your academic potential and professional goals.



A Final Important Issue to Consider

Although many of the kisses of death described in this presentation appear to be the fault of the applicant, we firmly believe the majority of them resulted from a lack of appropriate mentoring in the graduate school application process.



The Take Home Message

- ❑ Become aware of these kisses of death;
- ❑ Heed the advice contained in this presentation to avoid these mistakes;
- ❑ Seek help from faculty members who are willing to provide support and mentoring during the graduate school application process.



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