

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

Drew C. Appleby, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis

Karen M. Appleby, Idaho State University

Numerous authors offer advice to undergraduate psychology majors about what they ***should do*** to gain admission to graduate programs. However, few authors advise students about what they ***should not do*** when applying to graduate school and, when they do, few support their advice with data. We surveyed the chairs of graduate school admissions committees in psychology about the contents of graduate school applications that ***decreased*** chances for acceptance (i.e., kisses of death or KODs). A qualitative analysis of these surveys yielded the following six categories of KODs. Although the KODs identified in this study reflect unwise choices on the part of applicants, we believe many of them resulted more from a lack of appropriate advising and mentoring than from a lack of applicants' intelligence. Unless undergraduate psychology programs provide appropriate advising and mentoring concerning graduate school culture and the requirements of the graduate school application process, their majors are likely to commit these KODs. For example, an unmentored psychology major may interpret a personal statement at face value by perceiving it as an opportunity to share personal (i.e., private) information with the members of a graduate admissions committee. Unless applicants know that a personal statement should address issues such as research interests and perceived fit with a program, they may misinterpret its purpose and write personal statements that inadvertently doom their applications. Similarly, an unmentored student may interpret a letter of recommendation as a request for information from a person who knows her/him well and can vouch for her/his admirable traits and strong values (e.g., a family member or a member of the clergy). The purpose of our study was to remedy these unfortunate situations by providing undergraduate psychology majors with advice that will enable them to avoid the KODs in the graduate school application process.

Personal Statements

- Avoid references to your mental health. Such statements could create the impression you may be unable to function as a successful graduate student.
- 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 a desire to perform research and engage in other academic and professional activities.
- 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 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.

Letters of Recommendation

- 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 letter of recommendation authors 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 about the program from which you are saying you want to earn your graduate degree.
- 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.

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 admissions committees are composed of intelligent people; do not use your application as an opportunity to insult their intelligence.

A full-text copy of the article whose results are summarized in this document (see its reference below) can be accessed at:

http://www.leaonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1207/s15328023top3301_5

Appleby, D. C., & Appleby, K. M. (2006). Kisses of death in the graduate school application process. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33(6), 19-24.