

Kisses of Death
**in the Graduate School
Application Process**



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The rationale behind our study was that . . .

- . . . many publications offer psychology majors suggestions about *what they should do* when they apply to graduate school, but few offer advice about *what they should NOT do*.
- We decided to remedy this situation by collecting 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.**



The purpose of our study was to . . .

- . . . discover information that will enable psychology faculty to help their students avoid including things in their graduate school applications that can decrease their chances of acceptance.
- In other words, we wanted to collect examples of **kisses of death** that had prevented otherwise strong candidates from being admitted into the psychology graduate programs of their choice.



We collected data by . . .

- . . . sending letters to the chairpersons of the graduate admissions committees of all 457 programs listed in the 2001 edition of *APA's Graduate Programs in Psychology*.
- 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."



We analyzed data from 88 respondents . . .

- . . . qualitatively by identifying the central concepts in each of their responses . . .
- . . . and then comparing, contrasting, and combining these concepts into major themes and their constituent sub-themes.



The four major themes we identified were . . .

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.



We also identified three minor themes . . .

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



The following slides provide examples . . .

. . . of each of these themes and their sub-themes in the form of **direct quotations** from the participants in our study.



Major Theme #1: Damaging Personal Statements

- Sub-Themes
 - Altruistic Personal Statements
 - Excessive Self-Disclosure
 - Nonspecific Research Goals
 - Professional Inappropriateness

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.’”



Excessive Self-Disclosure

. . . Continued

- “An extremely personal life event was shared (i.e., a son was diagnosed with autism). This event was associated with the applicant’s interest in pursuing graduate studies in psychology. Unfortunately the applicant indicated that the graduate degree would be used to ‘get’ the drug companies responsible for the child’s condition.”
- “One applicant described, in excruciating detail, his yearlong struggle with painful hemorrhoids.”

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 . . . Continued

- “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 . . .

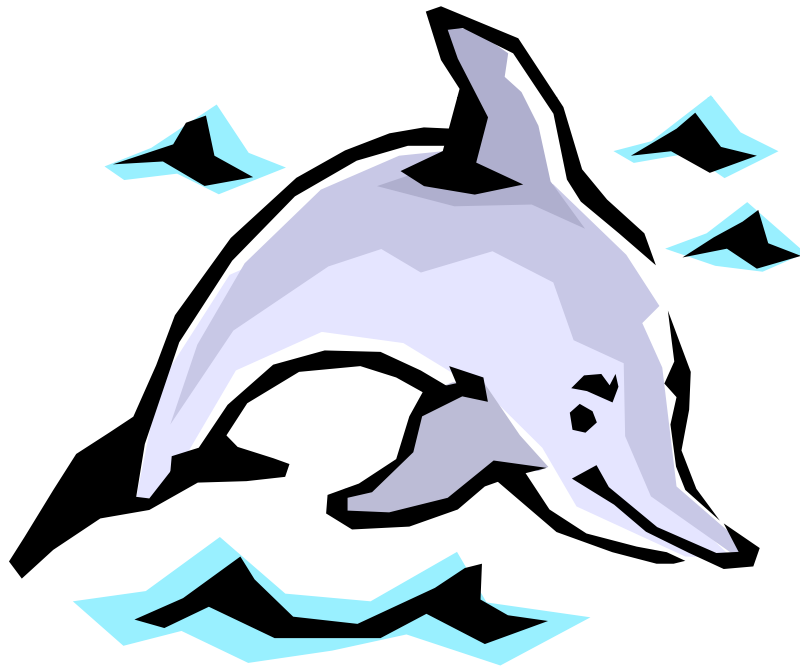
- “Although I understand the value of research, my real interests lie in working with people with clinical problems. My primary interests are in getting trained in clinical skills rather than research.”



Professional Inappropriateness

- “One applicant noted on his application under ‘prior employment,’ that he had performed (i.e., acted) in pornographic movies . . . this was not well received by the department in consideration for his acceptance in the graduate program.”

Professional Inappropriateness ... Continued



- “[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

. . . Continued

- “References to God—being religious is ok, but it has little relevance to research or psychology graduate school.”
- “I am a gifted therapist naturally. God has given me natural talents that make me a very good clinician. This was recently demonstrated when I helped my devil-worshipping brother go on the right path—God's path.”



Professional Inappropriateness

. . . Continued

- "Cutesy/Clever stuff. One applicant affixed a purple ribbon to the corner of the application to 'symbolize commitment to graduate school goals.' Another applicant enclosed a drawing from his son showing daddy in graduate school."



Professional Inappropriateness ... Continued

- "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

- Sub-Themes
 - 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

. . . Continued

- “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

. . . Continued

- “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 ... Continued

- “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.”

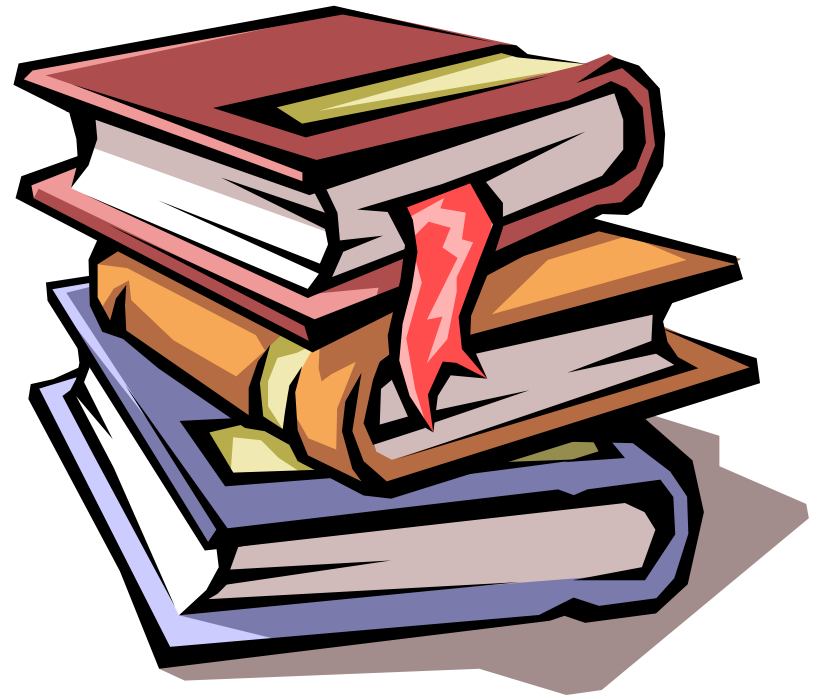
Undesirable Personality Characteristics Mentioned



- "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 ... Continued

- "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 ... Continued

- “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 ... Continued

- "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."

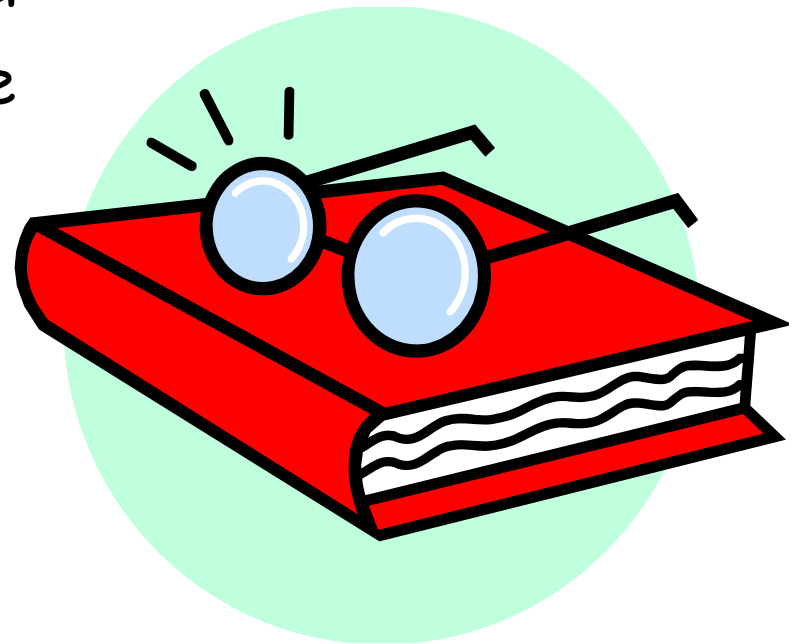


Major Theme #4: Lack of Writing Skills

- Sub-Themes
 - 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 ... Continued

- “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 . . . Continued

- “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 . . . Continued

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



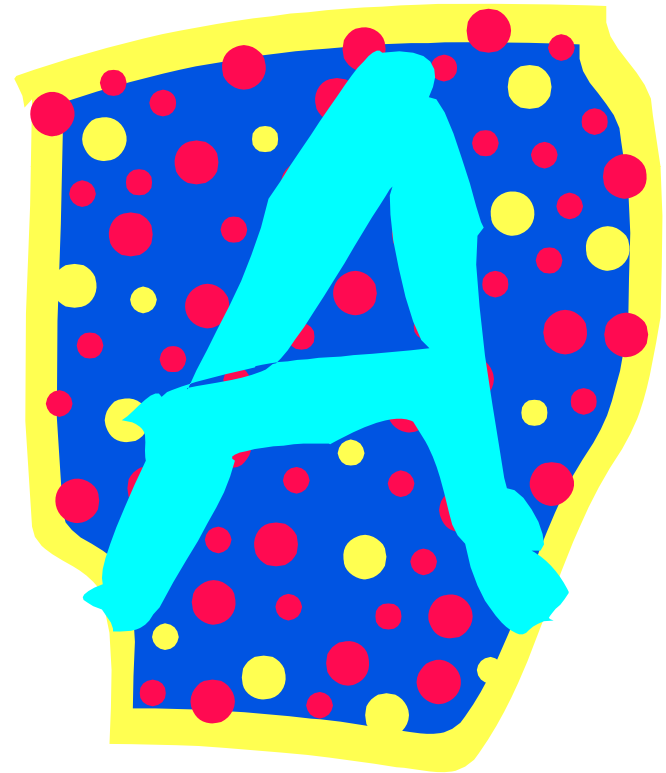
Minor Theme #2: Academic Problems

- Sub-Themes
 - Erratic Grades
 - Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance



Erratic Grades

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

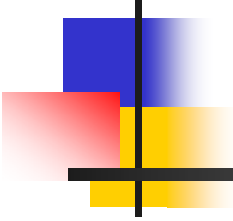




Blaming Others for Poor Academic Performance

- "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!*”



Summary of the . . .

. . . **Kisses of Death**



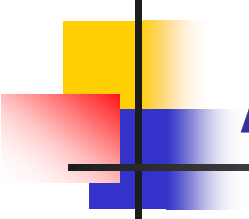
Personal Statements

- **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.



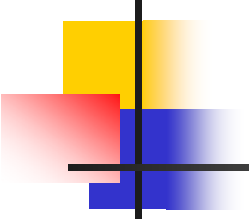
Misfired Attempts to Impress

- 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.

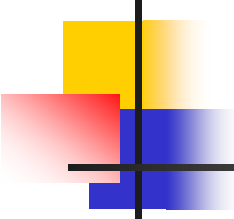


A final important issue to consider is that . . .

. . . although many of the kisses of death described in this presentation appear to have been committed by students who are not very bright, we firmly believe the majority of them resulted from a lack of appropriate mentoring in the graduate school application process.

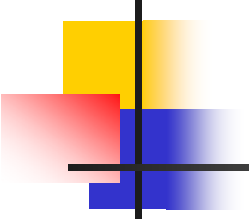


Unless undergraduate psychology programs provide appropriate advising and mentoring opportunities, their majors are likely to commit some of these kisses of death—not because they are unintelligent, but because they have never been exposed to the experiences or advice that enables them to understand the culture of graduate school and the requirements of the graduate school application process.



One extremely valuable source of information for those who plan to apply for graduate school is a PowerPoint presentation created by Patricia Taylor-Cooke, an IUPUI Psychology Department alumna who is currently a graduate student in pediatric neuroscience at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. You can access her presentation at the following url:

www.psynt.iupui.edu/Users/dappleby/undergrad/images/process.ppt



If you would like to read the original article that is the basis of this presentation...

- ... a full-text copy (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.