

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



Personal Statements

- Avoid references to your mental health. Such statements can create the impression you may be unable to function as a successful graduate student.
- Avoid making excessively altruistic statements. Graduate faculty can 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

- 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, or lack enough interest to learn about the 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 any type of spelling or grammatical errors in your application. These errors are an unmistakable warning of substandard writing skills, a refusal to proofread your work, or willingness to submit careless written work.
- Avoid writing that is unclear, disorganized, unconvincing, or 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., name dropping 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.