

## **Parsing “regret”: A computational linguistics approach to the standardized rejection letter for PhD applications**

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The rejection letter is a unique genre of academic communication designed to deliver bad news while maintaining a façade of institutional benevolence. This study employs Natural Language Processing (NLP) to analyze a corpus of 1,000 rejection emails received by the authors over a decade. We identify a consistent “Sympathy Sandwich” structure and a near-100% textual similarity across institutions. Our findings suggest that the “difficult decision” mentioned in letters is often a “copy-paste decision.” We conclude by proposing an open-source automated rejection generator to restore honesty to the academic rejection process.

Rejection Letter | Copy-Paste Mechanics | Emotional Buffering | Academic Disappointment

### **Introduction**

For PhD applicants, the inbox is a Schrödinger’s box: until opened, the email is both an acceptance and a rejection. However, statistical mechanics dictates that 99% of the time, the wave function collapses into a “We regret to inform you.”

Previous research has focused on the applicant’s pain. This paper shifts the focus to the efficiency of the rejector. We hypothesize that rejection letters are not crafted with care, but are generated by a stochastic algorithm designed to maximize polite distance while minimizing administrator effort.

### **The “Sympathy Sandwich” Theory**

Through Latent Semantic Analysis, we isolated the universal structure of the rejection letter, which we term the “Sympathy Sandwich”.

### **Significance**

This study provides a collective psychological massage for millions of rejected applicants.

By decoding the “Regret” into its true semantic form, we prove that rejection letters are not personal evaluations, but mass-produced electronic relief. This finding has major clinical significance: it cures the delusion of “not being good enough” and diagnoses the reality of “bad luck.”

We advocate for a reform in academic communication: abolishing the *holistic review* rhetoric and replacing it with a simple QR code that scans to reveal a giant red “X.” This would save countless hours of reading and writing, restoring the brutal honesty that academia so desperately needs.

- The Top Bun (Validation): Praise to lower defenses.
- The Meat (The Knife): The actual rejection, hidden behind excuses.
- The Bottom Bun (Dismissal): A generic blessing to close the interaction.

The core contribution of this study is Table 1, which decodes the institutional rhetoric into its raw semantic form. We observed a phenomenon called “Politeness Inflation,” where the length of the excuse correlates with the administrator’s desire to go home early.

**Table 1** | The semantic mapping table

Standard Academic Dialect	Cynical Truth	Category
“Thank you for your interest in our PhD program.”	“Thanks for paying the application fee. We needed a new coffee machine.”	Openers
“We were impressed by your strong credentials.”	“We looked at your GPA for 0.5 seconds. It didn’t make us vomit.” Or: “We didn’t read your file, but assuming you’re not a felon, this sounds nice.”	Validation
“Your application was reviewed carefully by the committee.”	“A tired grad student glanced at it while eating a sandwich.”	Process
“We had an exceptionally strong applicant pool this year.”	“There were 500 applicants. 499 of them are better than you. Maybe 500.” Or: “We ran out of money/spots, or our PI’s nephew applied.”	Excuses
“Admissions decisions involve a holistic review process.”	“We threw darts at a board. You missed.”	Methodology
“Unfortunately, we are unable to offer you admission at this time.”	“No. Just no.”	The Verdict
“This decision does not reflect your potential as a scholar.”	“It actually does. But saying that would be mean.”	Comfort
“We encourage you to reapply next year.”	“Please don’t. We really don’t want to read this again.”	Future
“We wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors.”	“Good luck finding a job that pays better than academia. You’ll need it.”	Closing
“Please do not reply to this email.” Or “This is the final decision.”	“If you argue, we will auto-filter you into spam.”	Disclaimer
“We have recommended you for the Master’s program (without funding).”	“You are smart enough to pay us tuition, but not smart enough to get paid.”	The Trap
“Your application has been placed on the Waitlist.”	“You are our Plan Z. We will only call you if everyone else dies.”	Purgatory

## Discussion

**The “Competitive Pool” Illusion.** As shown in Table 1, the phrase “Strong Applicant Pool” is the most frequent variable. We found that this phrase is a constant (*k*), regardless of whether the university is Harvard or a community college. It serves as a universal shield against accountability.

**The Solution: The Honest Rejection Generator.** To save universities time and liberate applicants from false hope, we propose the `reject_phd.py` script. This script replaces the entire admissions office workflow with a simple logic gate.

## Appendix

### Appendix A: The `reject_phd.py` Source Code

```
import random

def generate_rejection(applicant_name, university_name):
    """
    Generates a standardized, emotionally distant rejection letter.
    Saves administrative costs by 100%.
    """

    # The "Validation" Module
    validation_options = [
        f"Dear {applicant_name}, thank you for your interest in {university_name}.",
        f"Dear {applicant_name}, we were truly blown away by your credentials
(metaphorically).",
        f"Hi {applicant_name}, we received your materials. All of them. Even the extra
ones."
    ]

    # The "Reasoning" Module (Randomized for variety)
    reasoning_options = [
        "However, this year's applicant pool was tougher than a $2 steak.",
        "Unfortunately, our department funding was accidentally spent on a new coffee
machine.",
        "Regrettably, we are looking for someone with exactly 12.5 years of experience in
a field that doesn't exist yet.",
        "However, the alignment of the stars was not in your favor this season."
    ]

    # The "Dismissal" Module
    dismissal_options = [
        "We wish you the best of luck elsewhere (seriously, good luck).",
        "Please try again next year, or don't. It's a free country.",
        "May the odds be ever in your favor.",
        "Do not reply to this automated message. No one is listening."
    ]

    # Constructing the Email
    email_body = f"""
SUBJECT: Update regarding your application to {university_name}
```

```
{random.choice(validation_options)}
```

```
{random.choice(reasoning_options)}
```

Therefore, we are unable to offer you admission at this time.

```
{random.choice(dismissal_options)}
```

Sincerely,

The {university\_name} Auto-Rejection Bot v3.0

```
"""
```

```
return email_body
```

```
# Example Usage
```

```
print(generate_rejection("Poor Student", "MIT (Marginal Institute of Trash)"))
```

## Acknowledgements

We thank MIT, Stanford, Harvard, Yale and many other universities for rejecting our PhD applications.

**Stanford | Doerr** | Emmett Interdisciplinary Program  
School of Sustainability | in Environment and Resources

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Dear

Thank you for applying to E-IPER's PhD Admissions for Autumn 2026-2027. We appreciate your patience while E-IPER's PhD Admissions Committee completed our review. At this stage, we have selected a small group of finalists to be invited for interviews. After careful consideration, we regret to inform you that we have not selected you for the final round.

This year, our application pool was extremely competitive, making the Committee's selection of finalists incredibly difficult. At this point our program may only support a small cohort, and requires us to make difficult decisions from a pool of highly qualified applicants.

This decision in no way diminishes your application, which we trust as completed with thoughtfulness and care, nor your ability to make a positive impact in the world. We are genuinely sorry that we cannot bring you better news at this time. Below we have included a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), which may provide additional clarification.

We appreciate your interest in E-IPER and wish you all the best.

Sincerely,

E-IPER Admissions Committee



**THE GRADUATE SCHOOL**  
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

**Office of the Dean**  
100 Clio Hall  
Princeton University  
Princeton, NJ 08544

Thank you for applying to Princeton University's Graduate School for the 2025-26 academic year. While I assure you that the materials you submitted were carefully reviewed by the faculty in the Princeton School of Public and International Affairs, I regret to inform you the department did not recommend your admission for the upcoming academic year.

The number of admission offers available at Princeton for entering graduate students is extremely limited, and we cannot offer admission to all applicants who are well qualified. Indeed, many departments have applicants who could be admitted if it were possible to accommodate additional students. Our decisions take into account not only the applicants' merits but also the suitability of the programs to the candidates' expressed interests. Our goal is to achieve a sound match between the strengths of our programs and the interests of the relatively small number of outstanding students that can be accommodated.

Unfortunately, due to the volume of applications which we receive, it is not possible for the department or the Graduate School to go back and review applications to justify the denial or offer advice on fortifying a future application.

I wish you success in your plans for graduate study and thank you for considering Princeton University.

**Yale GRADUATE SCHOOL**  
**OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**

PO Box 208236  
New Haven CT 06520-8236  
*courier*  
One Hillhouse Avenue  
New Haven CT 06511

Thank you very much for applying to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Yale University. I regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you admission. As you know, the very high number of extraordinary candidates far exceeds the number of places we have in each program, and we are not able to admit many excellent candidates.

We wish you every success in all your future endeavors.

Sincerely,

Lynn Cooley

Dean, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences



**HARVARD** Kenneth C. Griffin  
**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES**  
OFFICE OF ADMISSIONS AND FINANCIAL AID

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Dear

After careful review, I regret to inform you that the Harvard Kenneth C. Griffin Graduate School of Arts and Sciences is unable to take favorable action on your application to the Harvard John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences in the study . The number of promising applicants well exceeded the number of offers of admission we can make for the 2025-2026 academic year.

I know that this decision comes as a disappointment. Unfortunately, enrollment of new students is limited to a small fraction of those who are qualified for admission. I want to assure you that your application received full consideration by faculty members in the program to which you applied.

We appreciate your interest in the Graduate School and wish you success in your future studies.

With best wishes,

Robert D. Coughlin  
Dean for Admissions and Financial Aid

## References

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