

Oxford & Cambridge Applications



A Careers Centre Guide



INTRODUCTION

- Roughly 11,500 undergraduates at Oxford and 12,000 at Cambridge
- Chances of getting in are approximately one in five at current applicant rates – varies by course. Application / success stats available on Ox/Cam websites
- 30 Colleges at each university with around 400 students per college.
- Oxford and Cambridge do not offer exactly the same courses eg: PPE is only at Oxford Individual sciences are only at Oxford Cambridge offers Natural Science
- Learning is fast paced 25-30 hours of reading a week as well as face to face teaching
- End of year/ mid-year exams not continual assessment – have to love exams
- Collegiate system – your college is like your hall of residence elsewhere but you will also receive college based teaching and tutorials



OXBRIDGE IS FOR YOU IF YOU...

- Are passionate about learning
- Are curious to know and understand more about the complexities of a given subject
- Thrive under pressure
- Work well in small groups where everyone is very academic
- Want to learn from top academics - and are not intimidated
- Are a thoroughly independent learner

BEFORE YOU APPLY

- Visit! Open days on web, prior booking essential
- Oxford and Cambridge Conference in London Area in March of year 12
- Online Research:
Check % chances of getting into specific course / college: How many apply / how many places. Check College League tables: Norrington Table (Oxford) and Tompkins Table (Cambridge). Oxbridge colleges are ranked by academic results. Some candidates try to play the system by opting to apply for low ranked / mid ranked colleges to increase their chances – universities would say admissions systems which include a student ‘pool’ / interviews at non-first choice colleges means this strategy brings only very limited success.
- Keep your outside interests going and get even more involved in your subject see also ‘Preparation’ (pages 12-13 in this booklet)

COMING FROM A STATE SCHOOL

- Sutton Trust website gives stats and tips about applying to Oxbridge from a state school (www.suttontrust.com)
- Cambridge publishes list of which A level subjects are considered sufficiently academic and which aren’t. Plenty of subjects on the accepted list are offered by state schools and sixth form colleges (www.trin.cam.ac.uk ‘Acceptable A Level Subject Combinations’)
- Oxford & Cambridge will use contextual data to flag students who require special consideration – but this will not necessarily lead to an offer or indeed an interview. It will merely highlight students whose applications will be very carefully looked at. Special consideration is given if students have 3 of these flags. The five criteria for this are:
 1. If GCSE grades are high compared with the school’s success rates
 2. If A level/IB score is high compared with the school’s success rates
 3. If the applicant has been in Care for 3 months+
 4. Student has attended an summer School Uniq (Oxford) or Sutton Trust (Cambridge)– apply online in Jan yr 12. You are selected for a summer school place against ‘widening participation’ criteria so your parents having attended university / your post code etc may preclude you from getting in.
 5. According to home postcode (areas of deprivation / low higher education participation attract flag)



*We select the best
of the best*

University of Oxford Admissions Tutor

HOW DO I DECIDE BETWEEN OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE ?

The university experience is broadly similar at Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge graduates will probably disagree - if you have family or close friends who went there expect to be strongly swayed by their allegiance to the university they went to). Based, where we are, in West London, Oxford has the edge in get-to and get-from-ability but essentially both are very accessible to Londoners. For those who want to study at course that is taught at both universities (not all are), below are a few subtle differences in the universities' recruitment procedures which may influence your decision.

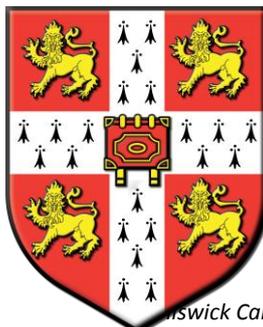
DIFFERENCES: OXFORD

- Pays close attention to GCSE profile
- Flexible about AS unit scores (don't ask for UMS points)
- Sit additional tests for most subjects (English ELAT, History HAT, Classics) after application before interview invitations.
- Interview fewer candidates for each place- make more decisions on paper – if you do get to interview you have a better chance of getting in (although rarely greater than 40/60)



DIFFERENCES: CAMBRIDGE

- Less interested in GCSE profile
- Most interested AS unit scores (require detailed UMS profile via additional application form – the SAQ) Need 90%+ UMS scores in study subject and the two AS Levels you carry on to A Level
- Additional STEP tests for some subjects after offer has been made
- Interview more candidates for each place. Cambridge might suit if you are particularly strong at interviews.



APPLICATION

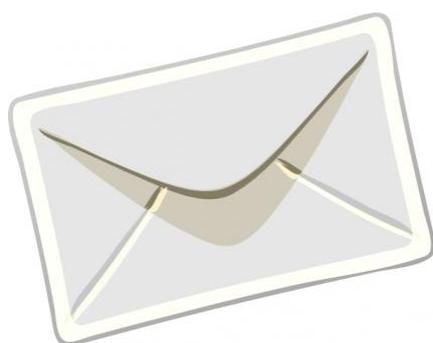
- Apply online through UCAS for only 1 course at 1 college only – cannot apply to Oxford and Cambridge.
- Choosing college is important but because students are pooled, one in five ends up at a college they did not apply to.
- No order of preference all 5 UCAS choices count the same but because of the early deadline other universities will know you have applied to Oxbridge. Modern myth: other top universities (eg Bristol, Durham, Imperial, UCL) can tell you applied to Oxbridge when application arrives before 15 Oct and this will put them off. Top non-Oxbridge universities deny this and indeed there is no evidence of this from among past Chiswick applicants. If you don't get into Oxbridge OR top non-Oxbridge or you get Oxbridge but NOT top non-Oxbridge this is probably just because all are all very competitive and you have simply not met the university's own entrance criteria. Bristol, for example, has far more applicants per place than Oxford and Cambridge – you are statistically more likely to be turned down by Bristol.
- Personal Statement: BE VERY LITERATE and refer to academic work you have done outside the A level curriculum – be specific in your references (eg quote actual articles and book titles)
- Oxbridge Personal Statements differ from others in that extra-curricular activities (D of E, volunteering, sports and music) are not as important as your interest in your subject – 99% of the space on an Oxbridge Applicant's Personal Statement should relate directly to your subject interest – show you have done related reading /activities that extend beyond the A level curriculum.
- Sutton Trust: “Your personal statement should be ‘love letter’ to your chosen subject – not an autobiography!”
- NOTE: The early UCAS deadline for Oxbridge:
5 October (school deadline) is latest for you to finish and Pay and Send
15 October school must have completed checks, added references, and sent to UCAS



You must work on your application over the summer

AFTER APPLICATION

- SAQ (Supplementary Application Questionnaire) – Cambridge send an email link to one of these straight after receiving your application and you have two weeks to complete it. They ask for a complete break down of your (UMS) module scores for your AS levels – available from Mrs Edgar, Exams Officer if you did not keep the sheet you were give on results day in August.
- On the SAQ you are asked to add 200 words of personal statement. Unlike the UCAS personal statement, here you can and must target what you say.
- Say why you have chosen a specific college, for example
- If you are not submitting an Open Application (to any college) then make sure you research your college – there is plenty of publicly available information on the internet
- Know what specialisms the tutors that work at that college have and how these are reflected in your own academic interests
- Know what facilities / clubs your college has and how they fit with your own extra-curricular interests
- Know where it lies in the geography of the university – is it near the faculty you will be having your lectures in ?
- No SAQ from Oxford but sometimes your course/college will require additional information and often they request examples of your work.
- Oxford require extra tests for 90% of subjects. English requires ELAT tests and History HAT which must be booked and sat by the dates on the Oxbridge website. Most tests can be sat at school – it is up to you to book onto these with the Exams Manager – the school does not automatically do it for you.
- Courses such as Medicine and Law will also require you to sit BMAT, LNAT . Some tests are sat outside school eg LNAT and UKCAT (non-Oxbridge medicine) are sat at Pearson Centres – where you do driving theory tests. Check websites to register and find past papers to practice.
- Shortly after application before interviews are offered you will be contacted to give you details of your tests (if relevant) and also asked to submit marked school work for your subject which can be used as a basis of discussion at interview. Take time to chose / tidy up your best pieces of work and make sure they cover topics you feel comfortable with discussing at interview. Keep your teachers informed of your deadlines if you are going to ask for something to be remarked.



INTERVIEWS

- If you are selected for interview you will hear in November about 3 weeks before the interviews take place. Some colleges /courses give even less notice than this and you will hear much closer to the interview date. Subject interview dates are published on the websites so you should keep the dates free just in case.
- If you can bear the slightly hysterical tone of fellow applicants, the online 'Student Room' Oxford / Cambridge Applicants Forums are great places to find out when the interview letters have gone out etc. You don't need to join in and contribute - reading what others in the group have to say gives you a feel for where you are in the correspondence cycle.
- School can organise 'mock interviews' in November/December
- Oxford interviews last up to 4 days because if you don't get accepted at one college you will be sent to interview with another.
- Cambridge interviews last 1 day If you are interviewed by a college and if they cannot take you but are impressed they will recommend you to go into the 'pool' you may receive and offer / offer of further interview from them. Cambridge does not test you on interview day but invites some students for STEP tests after their interview.

PREPARING FOR INTERVIEW

- Re-read any work that you submitted, your EPQ and your UCAS application and statement /SAQ before your interview – take printed version of these with you when you go
- Read the newspapers, listen to Radio 4 Today programme in the run up –a good general knowledge of current affairs is useful. Note and learn any news relevant to your subject
- Practice discussing your ideas about things – use your family and friends
- Go to your interview in clothes that you feel comfortable in that are also 'smart casual'
- Do not be tempted 'dress down' – it will attract unwanted attention
- You do not have to wear a suit (and tie). But if wearing a suit will help you feel sharp and more ready to impress then do wear one (others will)
- You will be looked after by current undergrads at your interview – you may be surprised to know how close they are to the people who interview you – they see them every week for one to ones. Therefore...
- Be sensible in how you manage your relationships with the student helpers and the other applicants – to an extent you are being observed all the time
- Don't come over as too retiring, nor too up for a party or in any way extreme
- Avoid politics (eg don't be drawn into any public arguments defending state education)
- Know that admissions tutors are not interested in which school you went to or who your friends and family are – they want the best students in their field

2-5 DAY RESIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS (OXFORD)

- Take some books and articles to read when you have down time
- Take some more casual clothes to wear during down time
- Try not to guess the university's motivations according to how many interviews you have, how many other applicants went, when and where they are. Second guessing how you are doing in the midst of the interview process is understandable but is fruitless and tends to just make you more nervous
- Real examples: All subject applicants were called to second interview on Day 2 except X who was not on the list – sleepless night for X. X was called on Day 3 to another college – the only applicant invited. X was subsequently offered a place there. Y only had one interview at one college, everyone else, it seemed, was called to two – Y was convinced unsuccessful. Turned out first college loved Y – didn't want Y seen elsewhere – Y received an offer
- Smart phones are useful for checking internet – to mug up on a college you didn't apply to if you are sent off for a second interview
- If you take laptop / tablet don't rely on wi-fi being easily available
- College libraries are open during interviews you have access to all their resources including internet/ computers
- Expect some applicants to already be friends with the each other when you get there. They may have gone up for interview a few days before you arrive or they might know people because they have done Oxbridge preparation courses together or come from a school that sends lots of applicants. Do not be put off by this – there will be plenty of people in the same position as you even if it doesn't seem so at first sight
- In the evenings you will be invited to take part in quizzes, dvd showings and other social activities in the student common room. Accept plenty of these invitations – try not to hide in your room even if this is tempting
- You might also be invited out to a pub...
- Completely avoid drinking alcohol (or trying to order alcohol if you are still under 18). Things are much more likely to go wrong socially if you have a drink. The authorities in Oxford are very clued up about the influx of interviewees in December many of whom are underage. The university knows how exactly how old you are from your UCAS application – do not risk anyone contacting them to verify your date of birth
- You will be sharper for your interview the next day if you have not had anything to drink the night before



INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Do not be put off by stories (largely myths) of outrageous or 'trick' Oxbridge interview questions – if you want to explore these, there are plenty on the internet, however your time is probably better spent preparing as follows:

Read articles related to your subject – understand the argument and formulate your own response – does the writer have a point? Do you disagree and if so, why? You are very likely to be given something to read and prepare before your interview

Look at any argument / interest / point of view you have expressed either in your personal statement or work you submitted – think about why you said it, imagine the counter arguments to your position. How will you defend your point of view but take on someone else's. Can take your own argument a bit further?

If you could, would you save the rainforest or the coral reefs?

Natural Sciences Interview

This is a false dichotomy: -
Know what this is and say if you spot one – commonly used

Admissions tutors are looking for students who are intellectually flexible – they will express opposing arguments in discussion with you and see how you react. You need to listen and understand, take on board the new information / perspective and change your argument to account for it. They are not

looking for you to say – 'I give up – I see you are right and I was wrong'. Equally they do not want you to stick rigidly to your first hypotheses without taking new perspectives into account. You need to be intellectually agile and you will get better at this if you practice beforehand.

What is language?

MFL Interview

Do not be disconcerted if you are really pushed out of your comfort zone when the interview gets tough. Expect to be asked to talk about unfamiliar material. The admissions tutors are not looking for students who simply know a lot – they are looking to see if you can apply intellectual strategies to interpret the unfamiliar and relate it back to things that you do know.

Why is it good to read the Twilight series?

English Interview

Admissions tutors eventually become your personal tutor. If you get a place you will see them once a week in term time for at least three years. They are predisposed, therefore, to take students they like. Most successful candidates made a personal connection with their

interviewer. No matter how nervous you feel, smile at their jokes (don't make your own), thank them at the end of the interview and try to convince them that you are teachable and pleasant.

What does it mean to take a car?

Law Interview

Is maths discovered or created?

Maths Interview

REPLIES AND OFFERS

- Oxford replies: around 10 Jan, Oxford tend to be Yes/ No
- Cambridge replies about a week before that – Cambridge is Yes / No / Pool. Pool interviews are around 7/8 Jan some applicants may be offered a place via the pool without a second ‘pool’ interview . If you are accepted or rejected from the Cambridge Pool you will also hear around 10 Jan
- Usual Cambridge offers: A*AA for humanities A*A* A for Maths and sciences
- Usual Oxford offers: AAA for humanities, Sciences A*AA and Maths A*A* A
- If you get a offer – well done! Note the conditions and work hard on fulfilling them. For most successful applicants getting the grades is the ‘hardest bit’
- If it’s a No – don’t despair!
- Oxbridge places are the most sought after IN THE WORLD
- The Oxbridge application procedure will serve you well – it is not time wasted
- Focus on what your other choices can offer

A LEVEL RESULTS DAY FOR OFFEREEES

- Oxbridge are notoriously strict about expecting you to meet precisely the grades in your offer(unlike some other Russell Group universities)
- Expect to lose your place if you drop down a grade in any subject
- This said, there are a few examples of A* being allowed to drop to A
- The universities are fair and may contact the school before the summer holidays to double check that there were no mitigating circumstances in the course of your exams eg disturbance in exam hall / illness / bereavement
- No mitigating circumstances = no flexibility in the grades accepted

WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU GET THERE

- Tutorial / Supervision system – one to one or small groups with tutor
- Eight week terms
- Hard academic work – the highest academic standards
- You may not take part time employment in term time. You may even find it difficult to take a job in Christmas and Easter holidays as you will have academic work to catch up on
- Cambridge usually provides university owned accommodation throughout your time there. Oxford varies according to college; all first years are housed and most third years. Some colleges offer accommodation throughout
- A great many clubs and societies
- Vast range of scholarships and extra funding available – Oxford and Cambridge are extremely wealthy institutions. Because of this, despite their prestige, they do not cost more than other Russell group universities. In fact, if you are in any sort of hardship, your education will be highly subsidised by the university and you might well pay less than you would elsewhere.
- Highest rates of graduate employment

Appendix 1

WILL YOU MAKE A GOOD OXBRIDGE CANDIDATE?
10 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF
(PREFERABLY BY JANUARY OF YEAR 12)

Do you: -

1. Read ahead in set texts / text books or around a subject you are studying at A Level the curriculum?
2. Talk about your learning with friends outside class?
3. Subscribe to a journal?
4. Talk to your teachers about your interest in the subject?
5. Use school /public library for extra resources and background reading
6. Have a special enthusiasm / interest related to your chosen subject that is not covered by the A/AS curriculum?
7. Plan to undertake an EPQ related to your chosen subject?
8. Relish open tasks where you have free rein to explore, research and express your ideas?

Have you ever: -

9. Undertaken any special activity (eg work experience / academic competition / holiday course) during you school holidays that relates to your chosen subject?
10. Attended any outside lectures / performances or visited exhibitions / historic sites relating to your chosen subject (not including organised school trips)?



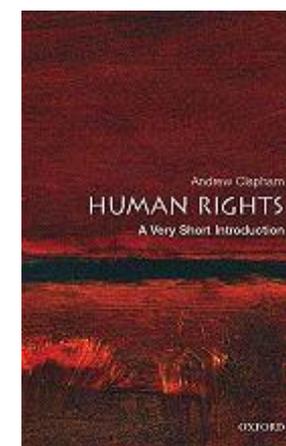
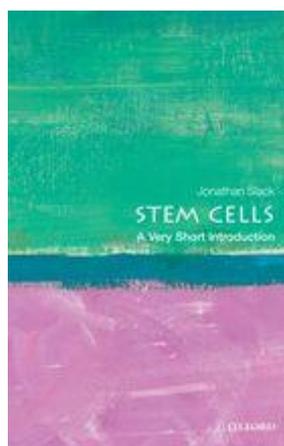
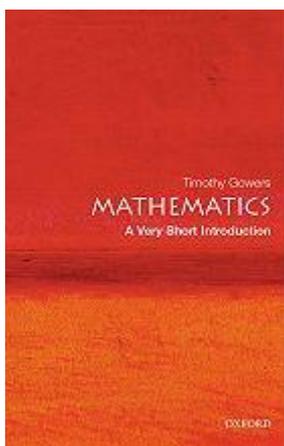
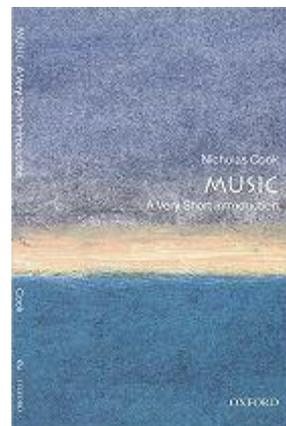
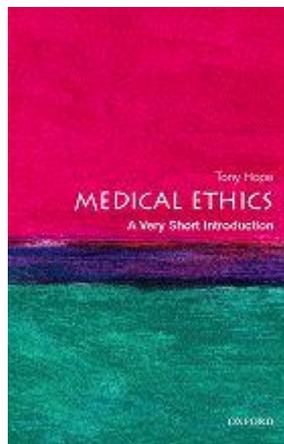
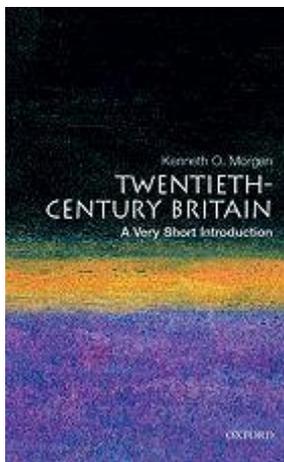
- If you can answer 'Yes' to 7 or more –
Congratulations! You already make a good Oxbridge candidate
Keep it up despite the pressure of AS / A level exams
- If you answer 'Yes' to 4 or more –
Try to increase this to 7 before the end of Spring Term in year 12
You could become a good Oxbridge candidate
- If you answer 'Yes' to less than 3 –
Are you **sure** you want to apply to Oxbridge?

Appendix 2

BACKGROUND READING

Background reading is essential – discuss your application with your subject teachers and they will give you some ideas and may have some books they can recommend/ lend you. Subscribe to a journal in the field that you want to study.

Don't know where to start? Need something extra? We recommend the 'Very Short Introduction' series

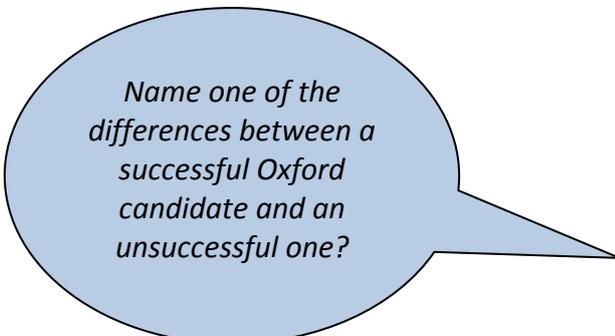


- More than one will relate to your subject
- More than 300 in the series
- They are not 'idiot guides' despite the title
- Some written by Oxbridge professors
- Short, cheap and interesting

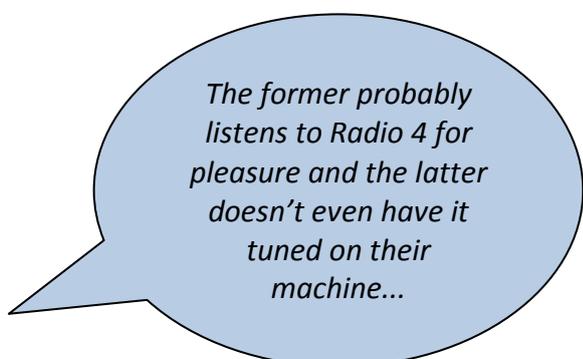
OTHER BACKGROUND PREP

You can 'top up' your learning by the following accessible means (this should never replace background reading)

- DVD's and videos – your teacher might be able to lend you some
- Television documentaries and I-player
- Radio 4: Medicine Now / More or Less / The Infinite Monkey Cage / Law in Action / A Good Read / Poetry Please / The Today Programme
- Radio 3: primarily music but programmes of interest for English / languages / classics
- Pod casts
- Websites (BBC is particularly useful)
- Talks and lectures - you live in London where there are many public lectures across all academic fields. Sometimes free, sometimes charged but rarely prohibitively expensive
- Concerts and performances – for music, languages, English



Name one of the differences between a successful Oxford candidate and an unsuccessful one?



The former probably listens to Radio 4 for pleasure and the latter doesn't even have it tuned on their machine...

University of Oxford Admissions Tutor