



Making a Successful Oxbridge Application

Overview of the Oxbridge application process

Oxford or Cambridge: you can't apply to both in the same year, so your first step is to decide which one is for you. This decision should always be based primarily on the course that you wish to study.

Investigate the courses available carefully: some of the courses and course structures may surprise you (such as Natural Sciences and the Tripos system at Cambridge), so read up on these on the university website. Make sure that you are truly interested in the course (you'll be studying intensively for at least three years!) and that you meet the admission requirements.

Explore the colleges: Oxford and Cambridge are collegiate universities, meaning that you are a member of your college community first and foremost and then these colleges together make up the university. Most applicants choose a college to apply to, but you don't have to – you can make an 'open' application. You can find more information about this and the advantages and disadvantages on the university websites. The course you follow for your subject and the options available are set by the university, not your college, and most courses are available at most colleges, so when you choose a college, you are really choosing where you want to live and the community that you want to be part of. You will be assigned an academic tutor within your college who will oversee your studies, but some or most of your teaching will be delivered outside your college – in the relevant university department and sometimes in other colleges. Remember that choosing a college is not an exact science and you could be offered a place at another college if your first-choice college is oversubscribed, so keep an open mind.

Make your UCAS application: you will need to apply by an earlier UCAS deadline if you choose to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. The deadline is **15 October**, but your school will set an earlier deadline – make sure that you know what this is and stick to it.

Additional application requirements: these vary by course and (in Cambridge) by college, so **check** these carefully on the university website. For some courses, you will need to sit an admissions test at your school or a test centre. You will **not** be enrolled for this automatically, so it is important that you ask your school to register you for the test by the deadline (**15 October** for most tests, but **15 September** for LNAT for Oxford and **1 October** for BMAT). You may need to submit one or two pieces written work to the college – check the deadline for this on the university website. For Cambridge, you will need to complete a supplementary application questionnaire, which the university will email to you – find out more about this on the university website.

The interview: Interviews are held for **all** courses and you will normally hear whether or not you have been called for interview in late November. If you called for interview, you are likely to be interviewed in December. This is often the part of the application process that causes the most anxiety and on which everyone focuses, but it is just one element. You may have one or more interviews, you may be invited to the university for a day or to stay overnight or even for a few days – it depends on your choice of university, college and course. You may also be asked to take a test onsite before your interview. Lots of

myths and rumours have built up over the years about the interview process, so focus on the useful information and support on the university websites.

The decision: you will normally hear in January whether or not you have been made an offer.

Preparing for the Oxbridge application process during lockdown

What can you be doing from now until September to prepare?

- **Prepare thoroughly for your Year 13 exams**

It's easy to get carried away with extra reading and researching colleges and courses, but, unless you have already completed your sixth form studies, any offer from Oxford or Cambridge will be conditional on your exam results and, unless you are intending to study a subject unconnected to your sixth form subjects, the knowledge you are acquiring at school will be tested directly during the application process. Use this time to review your Year 12 and consider volunteering to tutor or mentor a younger pupil in your chosen subject(s) - one of the best ways to check that you understand something completely is to teach it.

- **Research courses and colleges**

Although you can't visit Oxford or Cambridge at the moment, don't let that stop you exploring colleges and courses online. Many college websites have virtual tours and some colleges, such as The Queen's College, Oxford, are hosting webchats with current students for applicants. You could use Streetview on Google maps to envisage your 'commute' from any college to the relevant university department or library.

- **Research application requirements**

If you need to sit an admissions test, such as the Thinking Skills Assessment, look at one past paper now and work out how you are going to prepare for it. Don't do lots of past papers now – there are normally only a limited number available and it is best to use them nearer the time. If you need to submit written work, start considering now if you have any suitable pieces. If not, bear this in mind for work you are before the summer holidays or at the beginning of Year 13. Don't simply choose the piece of work for which you achieved the highest mark – submit work on a subject you found interesting and which you would be happy to discuss at interview.

- **Enjoy your general background reading/research**

Now is the time to enjoy finding out about your chosen subject(s). Don't feel that all your research has to be based on reading or MOOCs (massive open online courses) – watch documentaries, listen to podcasts, make use of the free online resources that are appearing during lockdown (such as virtual museum tours and foreign language films). Biographies of pre-eminent people in your chosen field can be particularly inspiring.

- **Engage in targeted, critical reading and discussion**

It's important that you can evaluate the quality of information presented to you and not just accept everything at face value. Target a couple of particular issues in your chosen field of study that interest you and research the different views and approaches taken. Challenge yourself to prepare a defence of a certain standpoint on a particular issue, with considered arguments against the other possible standpoints. If possible, discuss these with someone else – either in person, or online – who knows the same amount or more than you about these issues.

- **Start writing your personal statement**

Many students find this daunting, so start early. By trying to write it now, you'll be able to identify gaps in your background reading etc. and will have the whole summer to rectify this. If you are choosing between two courses, writing a different personal statement for each one may help you decide which one you really want to follow. Top tips for an Oxbridge personal statement are:

- don't feel you have to 'start from the beginning'. The first sentence is often the hardest to write, so start with bullet points or notes on what you want to include, then formulate these into sentences or paragraphs and only then start fitting it all together;
- nearly all of the personal statement should focus on the course you are applying for;
- show how the subjects you are studying at the moment will help you in your future studies. This could be through subject knowledge or transferable skills;
- do mention your extra-curricular activities and achievements and the skills you have gained from these, but keep this section short;
- don't 'lecture the lecturer' – don't just tell the reader what you know about the subject you want to study or that you find x interesting. Instead, explain *why* you find x interesting and what you have done with this interest, such as researching a related topic;
- similarly, try not to say that you are 'passionate' about things. The person reading your personal statement will assume that you are passionate about the course you are applying for, as otherwise, why are you applying? You can, however, explain *why* you are passionate about a particular subject or topic;
- don't use language you wouldn't normally use. It's very obvious if you start using words from a thesaurus that you have never used before. The most complicated concepts are often explained most effectively using straightforward language, so make sure you reflect your real voice in your personal statement;
- tell the truth! It sounds obvious, but if you say that you have read a particular book or that you regularly read a certain journal, you could be asked to talk about this at interview;
- do ask for feedback from others on your personal statement but don't ask too many different people, as everyone will have different opinions and there is no one way to write a personal statement. Make sure you strike a balance between taking feedback on board and trusting your instincts.

- **Time to relax**

Don't feel that you have to spend all your time on Oxbridge preparation. We are living through strange times and there is a lot of time between now and 15 October (the Oxbridge UCAS deadline), so never feel guilty about exploring other interests and spending time relaxing too. It's important to be able to 'switch off' from studying.

Our reply

