

# Applying to Oxbridge – an informal guide

## Prepared by Ginnie Redston

### Preamble

Much nonsense is talked about Oxford and Cambridge. If you decide to apply, it is important to de-mystify the process and be as down to earth as possible in your reasoning. Vague ideas about privilege, dreaming spires and punting on the river are fine and dandy, but peripheral. What will get you into Oxbridge is a good brain, an ability to perform well under pressure, and (at least as important as either of the above) very careful planning. You will need to have a precise understanding of a) what course you wish to study and b) if you have chosen a particular college, what the reasons are for your choice.

### Some good reasons for applying to Oxbridge are:

- You have started to read around the various prospectuses and have decided that the course you want to do is well catered for by Oxford/Cambridge.
- You have researched and like the idea of the collegiate system.
- You have discovered that students at Oxbridge learn fast, are taught in small groups, have a very low dropout rate, and enjoy conditions which are very conducive to good performance.
- You are likely to achieve at least 4 As at AS and 3As at A2 and already have good GCSE results, although this does not mean a solid set of grade A\*s by any means. If you have uneven GCSEs but are now on target for As at A level, then prepare a brief explanation in your personal statement and go ahead.
- **You realise that entrance to Oxbridge is very competitive and that every year excellent candidates fail to get in. You have faced up to this and already know that should you not get an offer there are other first class universities where you would be very happy to study.**

### Start early; be organised

One of the reasons that certain schools get so many students into Oxbridge is that they **expect** their students to aim high, and they start to prepare them well before the end of year 12. Many centres will expect students to have the university applications procedure well under way before the end of the summer term in year 12, so that the UCAS form is already completed in draft form. This means that the forms may be finished and sent to Cheltenham within the first month of year 13. If you are reading this in year 12, there is no reason why you should not do the same. You do not need to have a tutor to hold your hand; make a start independently.

### Individual Research

If you have not already got your own copies of the university prospectuses, order them from the universities' admissions offices. Also get the alternative prospectuses. Look at the content of the courses carefully: there are considerable differences of content and approach between Oxford, Cambridge and other good universities. Look at the various league tables, both for universities and for departments within the universities, but remember that there is much discussion about the value of these tables, and there are flaws in all of them. Use them along with other course guides and H.E. handbooks and then once you have done the research, trust your own judgement.

### Choices, Visits and Courses

You should also research the individual colleges within the universities. Investigate them on the web or in the library and then order your own prospectuses for the ones you like. On the web, a full list with links to the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges can be found here:

**Oxford College list:** <http://units.ox.ac.uk/colleges/>

**Cambridge College list:** <http://www.cam.ac.uk/CambUniv/colleges.html>

Some colleges are more famous than others, but remember that all of them follow the same courses, teach according to the same system and their students will attend the same departmental lectures. Select a number of colleges and look at the statistics to see how heavy the demand has been for places on your chosen course. Start to get a feel for the differences between the colleges, but do **not** choose a college just because it has a famous name. Try to go to at least three open days at different colleges: that will

give you a better understanding of how individual they are in character. You may find that while one college seems remote, another has an immediate appeal.

A "newer" college [1], or one which is a few minutes by bike from the centre of town, may have a very happy buzz; on the other hand a college which reminds the visitor of *Brideshead Revisited*, *Speak, Memory* or *Zuleika Dobson* [2] may be deathly dull. To paraphrase the words of a Cambridge student, remember that it is the people who create the atmosphere of the college, and the peer group will vary from year to year. It is anyway a mistake to assume that you will mix only with people from your own college: if you gain a place your friendship group will straddle several.

Remember that if you cannot get to an open day, you can arrange an informal visit on a different occasion: phone the college admissions office and ask. This is another important point: don't be afraid to ask for advice from the admissions office of any college in which you are interested. It is in the college's interest to help you to be as well informed as possible: if you find a college to be unhelpful, ring another! Both universities are eager to show that they are not elitist. If your school or college does not already arrange for visits to these universities, or for guest speakers to come to the school from Oxford and Cambridge, talk to your tutor or head of sixth form. Ask for speakers to be brought to the school, and when they do visit, get as much information as possible from them. Further information about volunteer speakers can be found here: <http://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/campaigns/target/intro.html> and here: <http://www.generaladmin.com/ts/pressinfo.htm>.

There are also a number of residential short courses which are designed to give six formers an idea of what Oxbridge is like: your head of sixth form should know about them. Try to get a place on one of these. If this proves impossible, don't worry, just carry on with your own careful preparation.

### **Remember the other good universities**

Do not become obsessed with Oxbridge to the exclusion of all the other excellent courses on offer. When you are going through the H.E. guides you should make a list of other universities whose courses appeal. Once you have chosen either Oxford or Cambridge, make sure you research the other choices available to you. You may well find that Nottingham, Warwick, York, Bristol, Bath and the University of London colleges among others have courses that are at least as good as Oxbridge. Try to think of Oxford or Cambridge within the context of other good universities in the UK, not in exclusion to them. Note that many of the academics now teaching at Oxbridge gained their first degrees at other institutions. So select the other five choices you are permitted on the UCAS form carefully. Try to get it clear in your mind that you would be very happy to study at one of these other five universities if you do not get in to Oxford or Cambridge.

### **Choices have been made: what next?**

Working from a photocopy of the UCAS form, start to fill it in. Do the same for your Oxford or Cambridge application form. Remember that if you intend to apply for Oxbridge you need to get your forms sent off by the second week in October - preferably earlier. Read the handbook carefully so that you complete the form accurately. Make sure that you list all your GCSE results. Remember that other qualifications are also relevant and indicate a range of skills beyond the mainstream. For example certification showing competence in music, speech and drama, sport, computer literacy, and also achievement in Duke of Edinburgh, guides/scouts or the cadet corps, all demonstrate that you have interests and the ability to commit yourself to activities outside the usual curriculum. Once you are sure of what you have to offer, sort out the layout on your form so that it is as clear and easy to understand as possible.

Apart from an accurate list of qualifications, the personal statement is the single most important part of the form that you will complete. The Admissions Tutors will look at your qualifications, your grade predictions, your personal statement and the reference from your school or centre. It is up to you to make your personal statement count. As you plan, consider whether you wish to tweak the statement slightly for the Oxbridge application form. An extra paragraph indicating why you have applied there, and why you have chosen a particular college or have chosen an open application, would be appropriate. A more detailed discussion of the personal statement is given on a separate sheet. See my ["Notes on the Personal Statement"](#).

When you are satisfied that your personal statement is as good as you can make it, word process it (if possible) and make sure that it will fit into the relevant space on the form. Remember that the form will be reduced so don't choose a fussy or small font.

When your Oxbridge and UCAS forms are complete pass them to your tutor. Make one last check that your teachers have predicted the grades that you need. It is no use applying to Oxbridge and other top

universities if you are not predicted the grades required. Also try to find out whether the reference has already been written. If it has not, try to apply pressure discreetly. Some centres are much more efficient than others in this respect. If the reference has been written your forms can be completed and posted within a day of your handing in your application to the tutor or to the school office.

Centres are now being encouraged to submit students' UCAS forms electronically. If your centre processes applications this way, do the preparatory work I have recommended above and then follow the guidance provided by your tutor, careers advisor or head of sixth form.

Once the form has been received at Cheltenham you should get an acknowledgement from UCAS. The next stage is up to the universities, so try to put thoughts about your application on one side and get on with your academic work.

### **Oxbridge interviews**

Many universities offer places sight unseen, although all will hold open days when you may visit and get a feel for the place. Cambridge and Oxford interview almost all those who apply.

When you are called for interview, you will be expected to do one or more of the following:

- Complete an oral or written test in a subject relevant to what you wish to study: say, maths for those wishing to read computing science, unseen poetry analysis for those who wish to read English literature.
- Send or take along at least two marked essays to provide examples of the standard of your work.
- Go through more than one interview with different interviewers or groups of interviewers.
- Show that you are aware of current issues related to your chosen subject.
- Questions may range from a relatively routine "What made you decide to study X, apply to Y college, seek a place at this University?" to requests that you explain tricky problems related the subject you wish to study. Don't feel you have to keep up a constant flow of chatter. If you get asked a tough question, ask them to repeat it, rephrase it, or ask for a minute or two to think about it. If you really don't know the answer, say that you don't and try to suggest another line of discussion. The interviewers would rather you do that than launch nervously into platitudes or - worse! - nonsense. Basically, you need to expect the unexpected. Don't think that you have to be an expert on everything.

The interviewers will be looking to see whether:

- You have a genuine enthusiasm for your chosen discipline.
- You have a good general educational background and know how to break down a problem and discuss it intelligently - even if you don't have an answer.
- You have interests which extend beyond the A level syllabuses and can discuss them.
- You can think on your feet.

If you can, get interview practice either at your school, through the county careers service or from any people you know who have been through academically rigorous interviews themselves and know how they work. This is one area where the non-maintained sector has traditionally had an advantage. Schools in this sector understand the importance of the interview and usually prepare their candidates very carefully. If your school does not offer help with interview practice, don't be discouraged. You can research interview technique yourself and perhaps set up a mock interview independently.

**For further information on Oxbridge interviews, please refer to first -hand reports provided by former interviewees in the "Profiles" section of the aua Oxbridge admissions website.**

( <http://www.oxbridge-info.co.uk> )

### **What do I wear?**

This is one of the most Frequently Asked Questions. Find something that you feel comfortable in, and wear that. If you never wear suits (and ties if you are male) you are probably going to feel very ill at ease - so why do anything that will only add to your nervousness? Smart casual is fine. I know a number of students who wore their best jeans or trousers with a reasonably smart top. They got places. On the other hand, if you are used to doing so, dress formally. Look clean, kempt and organised; the actual items of clothing selected are not so important.

## Other points to consider

**Do** leave plenty of time to get there. If accommodation is offered, take it; you will have somewhere to go during "down" time.

**Do** use the opportunity to look around and learn about the college and town. Remember everyone else will be nervous too: be sociable.

**Don't** drink too much before the interviews: be sociable but not that sociable.

**Don't** let your own nervousness lead you to make unwarranted assumptions, perhaps on the basis of accent or appearance, about the other interviewees. There may be one or two who seem snooty or even hostile. These are probably people who lack social skills and are locked in their own nerves. There will be many more who will be happy to share their experiences.

**Remember** that if you are there at all, you are all people who have been predicted the highest grades: it may be your first opportunity to interact with a large group of students who are used to working at your level. Don't feel threatened by it; enjoy it. This is what it will be like at university, whether you end up at Oxbridge or another good centre of learning. Go with the flow.

## When the interview's over

In some ways the worst time is afterwards. You travel back on the train or whatever, perhaps brooding about silly things you think you've said. And then there's the waiting, which can be particularly prolonged if you've applied to Cambridge. Try to put the whole thing out of your mind. There's nothing you can do about it after the event. If you don't get offered a place, at least you had the courage to give it a try. You survived some tough interviews which will have taught you a great deal about how to handle such things in the future. You had an interesting day or two during which you gained useful knowledge about how these institutions function. If you cannot put the experience out of your mind, try to list the things you have learned about the process and then put the list to one side. Focus on the other universities you have applied to. Get on with more background work on them, so that if you do get two or more offers you will already have some idea about which you would like to accept.

## The letter arrives

**Whatever the letter says, you MUST keep up the momentum of work for your A levels.**

If accepted, once the euphoria wears off you will realise that you now **have** to get the very highest grades, and possibly Step papers as well, before you can be sure of being able to take up the offer. If rejected, you have to cope with the letdown and try to get on even though you may want to go somewhere and yell or throw things. You will have to try and motivate yourself again as quickly as possible, because you will **still** have to aim for the highest grades for those other excellent university courses you listed on your UCAS form.

Either way, it is important to get back to normal as quickly as possible and move on.

## And a last word:

Good luck!

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[1] Any college less than 200 years old may be considered "newer".

[2] Evelyn Waugh: *Brideshead Revisited*, London, 1945

Max Beerbohm: *Zuleika Dobson*, London, 1911

Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory*, London, 1967

(Two novels and an autobiography which in their different ways emphasize the privilege associated with the traditional, clichéd view of Oxbridge. The first two deal with Oxford; Nabokov refers to his time at Cambridge.)