

Different parts of the admissions process and considerations for an Oxbridge (Oxford or Cambridge) application

The sections below cover the most common potential parts of the application process for applications made to Oxford and Cambridge and contains some suggested material for how you can prepare for them. Not every element will be necessary for every application, so please just use the aspects that you need to, by establishing from the respective website what is expected/required – both Oxford and Cambridge have exhaustive and detailed information in this regard. If you find that there is anything you are unsure of on the course page, please get in touch with the Careers Team at USP for support – if they are unable to support with your enquiry they will suggest you contact the university directly.

Researching the difference between Oxford and Cambridge and establishing the right course

You can't make an application to both Oxford and Cambridge. As you will have to choose it is important as early as possible to decide which, if either, is right for you. There are many things to consider but below are some key considerations:

Usefully, Oxford has actually created an accurate (albeit quite reductive) overview of the differences between the two institutions and this is well worth a read. Contained in this page are also some really useful overviews of the different aspects of college systems and the application process:

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/teachers/oxford-and-cambridge-similarities-and-differences>

It is really important that you investigate the differences between the course you want to study at both institutions (assuming that they both offer it) and that should be the primary driver behind your decision. There are several ways in which you can investigate your chosen course and one quite reliable one is to look at the breakdown of modules and reading list/s. By doing this, not only are you informing your decision, you are also helping to strengthen a potential interview. You should also be aware of the differing ways in which you will be examined and how your assessment would be structured by the two universities, as this could differ.

When at interview for either Oxford or Cambridge you should not only have clear in your mind why you want to study that particular degree, but also why at that university. In instances where there is something unique about the course or approach, this will be particularly important. Reading lists aren't always available readily online but it is definitely something that you would want to consider at least briefly and ideally dip into some of those aspects that you find most interesting – once again, this could be useful at interview – both universities will welcome requests for these reading lists.

Preparing the personal statement

This is your opportunity to present to admissions tutors evidence that you are passionate about your subject, are a genuine scholar in the making and have the ability to cope with the demands and rigour associated with their degrees. It should be primarily academic – at least

80%. The remaining 10-20% dedicated to extra-curricular activities is very much there for the potential benefit of the other 4 institutions that you apply to. For that reason it is important to include but it isn't something that either Oxford or Cambridge will be very interested in – they want to see your academic potential, evidenced through the extent to which you have engaged with your subject (especially outside of the classroom if it is a subject you currently study). The way you reflect on and portray your thoughts and interests will play a pivotal role in the insight that the admissions tutors get into both your passion and commitment, but also your inherent potential. In some ways, Oxbridge personal statements can at first glance read a little like scholarly essays but they are actually very different, both in design and purpose, and whilst there are formulaic approaches that can be applied, the best way to understand the expectations is just to read some examples of successful ones (there are many online). When doing this, be incredibly careful not to copy anything. All personal statements are plagiarism checked by UCAS, who then inform universities if there are any indications of copying – also be careful not to do it by accident.

If your subject is vocational (i.e. law, medicine, etc.) then work/voluntary experience and your reflections on it could prove crucial both in your personal statement and at interview. If your subject is a traditionally academic discipline, a significant proportion of your personal statement would typically be dedicated to using well-chosen examples evidencing how you have engaged with the subject and where your interests lie. Essay writing competitions; subject clubs; debating societies; trips to museums, art galleries, historic sites; MOOCs (free online academic short courses); reading outside of the curriculum (including academic journals); summer schools; taster lectures; talks at universities and seminars, although not close to being an exhaustive list, are all different ways of evidencing authentic interest and passion for a subject and exploration of it. Remember that the key here is to show that you have scholarly potential and really care about your subject. To do this you must show the evidence, but how you reflect on this evidence is crucial – you must avoid just listing lots of examples but instead choose a few and really reflect on and develop them - this helps to show the way you think. If you have a lot of examples to choose from, there can be a temptation to crowbar all of them in, thinking that it will impress, but you need to find a balance. You don't want the examples to be too sparse but it is important that you give yourself the opportunity to reflect and demonstrate the way your mind works. This, along with your predicted grades, academic achievements so far, written submissions and pre-admissions test results (where appropriate) and references, act together to demonstrate to admissions tutors that you are a suitable candidate.

Remember that you can only submit one personal statement as part of your UCAS application and this will be viewed by all of your choices. For this reason, although it is fine to mention things like university summer schools or taster lectures that you took part in, you should not be making any specific reference to why you want to study at a particular institution in your personal statement. Instead, the purpose of this document is to show your passion for the subject, so that all five universities can determine your suitability. The only real difference between an Oxbridge/high ranking university typical personal statement, is that they will expect more and better-quality examples of your supra curricular engagement and reflection – they administer tough courses and they need proof that you are likely to be able to cope with the demands.

Getting ready for pre-admissions tests

The university websites are excellent resources here. All the information concerning this is on the admissions page for your course but you can also use the links below to find out more and get links to prep material:

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/guide/admissions-tests>

<https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/admissions-assessments/pre-interview>

A large proportion of these tests can be taken at the college as a registered centre and will take place on the same day, as you will see in the links above regarding timelines.

For law, medicine and maths, amongst other subjects, there are some tests that are also required by other universities and are not necessarily unique to Oxford and Cambridge; the LNAT, BMAT and STEP, for example. These tests and associated preparation could also be useful for other applications, so check entry requirements carefully for other universities that you are planning to apply for. For many of the most prestigious universities and competitive courses there are additional requirements and in some cases this will include sitting additional tests as would be the case with Oxford or Cambridge, please ensure that you have carefully scrutinised your other shortlisted choices to ensure that you understand all of the admissions requirements and are aware of processes and deadlines. Some of these tests might not be tests that you can take at college but instead will need to go to an independent test centre to take; it is very important that you establish this so that if necessary, you can locate a suitable independent test centre and meet any internal registration deadlines that they might have.

Submission of written work

For essay based subjects it is quite likely that you will need to submit one or more pieces of written work that are typically no more than 2000 words each. Once you have established the specific requirements of the university/college, you can discuss with your teacher/s what would be the best piece/s of work to submit, given the expectations. This is something that it is good for you to be aware of early so that you are in possession of a suitable piece of marked A-level work when required by the university or specific college within. The requirements can vary between different colleges for a given subject so for specific enquiries, you are likely to have to contact college admission teams directly. As a general rule, these would need to be marked essays that you have done as part of your normal studies within the college.

For more information on this, please see the links below:

<https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying/admission-assessments/submitted-work>

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/guide/written-work>

Any additional potential expectations

In addition to the very typical general potential entry expectations above, please be sure to carefully scrutinise the relevant course page and in particular the entry/admissions requirement section, in case there is anything extra. Both universities have excellent

websites that should always be up to date. The only caution here is to understand that you might need to be considering **college specific expectations** in addition to the more general umbrella expectations of the university, so please be sure to thoroughly interrogate this component.

Interviews

Not much attention will be given to interviews at this stage but there is one important piece of information to be aware of: it is quite likely that they will begin with discussing some part of your personal statement at interview. Content on the personal statement can be a very logical starting point for your interview, partly because it should be a subject or area that you are comfortable talking about, so make sure you are! Try to focus on areas of very genuine interest in your personal statement because you might be expected to expand your thoughts on them at interview and those interviewing you will be specialists in the field – it is likely that no matter what area you tackle within the subject, they will be familiar with it. It is also possible that your written submission/s will be a starting point to keep that in mind as well.

Guidance links for Oxford and Cambridge

There is a wealth of information on both Oxford and Cambridge's websites and we would encourage applicants to use them broadly, but we have included below what we feel are useful general guidance pages:

Oxford – general applicant guide:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/guide>

Oxford – choosing a college:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges>

Oxford – suggested reading for different subjects:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/suggested-subject-resources>

Oxford – course guide:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses>

Cambridge – application guide:

<https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/applying>