



OXBRIDGE APPLICATIONS General Guide

1.	What does Oxbridge mean?	2
2.	Why should I consider applying to Oxford or Cambridge?	2
3.	I am top of my class at school. Is that good enough?	3
4.	Can I apply to both?	3
5.	Should I choose Oxford or Cambridge?	3
6.	What can I study?	4
7.	What factors are they taking into account when considering candidates and making their decisions?	5
8.	Extra-curricular activities	5
9.	What about Colleges?	5
10.	Choral and organ scholarships	6
11.	How does the application process work?	7
12.	Do I need to take an Admissions Test?	8
13.	Will an EPQ help my chances of getting an offer?	8
14.	Will doing four A-Levels help my chances?	8
15.	What about interviews?	8
16.	What can I do next?	10
17.	Thoughts on Wider Reading	11
18.	Resources	12
19.	Where can I find out more information?	12

1. What does Oxbridge mean?

- Oxbridge is the collective name for **Oxford** and **Cambridge**.
- They are the two oldest and most prestigious universities in the country with an international reputation.
- Oxford and Cambridge are currently ranked as the **best and second-best universities in the world** respectively, according to the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2017-2018¹.
- 'According to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, the official UK-wide assessment of all university research, Oxford has the largest volume of **world-leading research** in the country.' (www.ox.ac.uk)
- Cambridge was ranked number one in the 2017 *Guardian*, 2018 *Sunday Times* and *Complete University Guides*
- Oxford has more world-leading academics than any other UK university, according to the *Complete University Guide* in 2014.
- *At Oxford, every 21 seconds someone borrows a book; there are 117 miles of shelves, over 12 million printed items and over 100 libraries*

2. Why should I consider applying to Oxford or Cambridge?

- You are a **top academic** (all or mostly A* or 8/9 at GCSE). However, this alone is not enough.
- You are **passionate** about your chosen subject: there is nothing more important than this. You should be reading widely and independently in your chosen area, going above and beyond what is required of you by your teachers. A recent newspaper article on Oxford described it as '**Disneyland for geeks**': if this does not sound like you, do not apply.
- You want to **work hard** at this subject:
 - o Oxford and Cambridge have 8-week terms which are very **intensive** and a much bigger **workload** than other universities: students produce 2-3 times as much written work as their counterparts on comparable courses elsewhere
 - o There is a heavy focus on **independent study/learning**
 - o Tutorials/supervisions (one tutor with one, two, or three students for one hour –called tutorials at Oxford and supervisions at Cambridge) are one of the key elements of the Oxbridge teaching system. The point of the interview is to see whether you can not only cope with, but **thrive on this intensive tutorial-type teaching**
 - o Lectures/labs/exams are at university/department level, rather than College level
 - o Roughly a 40 hour working week
 - o For example, for a subject like English, you should expect to be writing 8 essays and working through 40 texts during the course of an 8-week term.

¹ https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2018/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats

- **Think carefully before applying simply because it is Oxbridge:** in order to get anywhere in the process, your application needs to **show a passion to take your subject to the next level**. Do you have and can you demonstrate that level of interest?

3. I am top of my class at school. Is that good enough?

- **Not necessarily.** Both universities are extremely competitive. Around 19,000 people applied for around 3,200 undergraduate places for Oxford entry in 2016, which means that Oxford receives, on average, **around six applications for each available place** (www.ox.ac.uk). Indeed, there has been a 47% increase in undergraduate applications to Oxford in the last ten years: it is extremely competitive. In 2014, Cambridge had an all-time high number of applications, with 16,752, and the number of applicants remains stable.
- 97% of those taking A-Levels who enter the University of Oxford achieve grades of AAA or better (www.ox.ac.uk). 97.7% of accepted applicants who received Cambridge offers in 2016 went on to achieve the equivalent of A*AA (www.cam.ac.uk).
- Indeed, recent information suggests that:
 - o The *average* Cambridge applicant has 6–8.5 A* at GCSE (successful candidates may well be higher)
 - o At Oxford, whilst there is no ‘minimum’ A* cut-off, information suggests that the average number of A* at GCSE for a successful candidate is 6.2.
- The profile of a successful candidate at either university was very similar in 2011:
 - o **Cambridge: average of 2.5 A* at A-Level**
 - o **Oxford: average of 2.3 A* at A-Level**
- Since 2006, Oxford has been making more offers to students with higher GCSE profiles. In 2015, the average number of A*s was 8.45, and this average has gradually increased year on year. In 2012, 76.9% of Oxford offer holders had 7 or more A*s.

4. Can I apply to both?

- No. The only exceptions are potential organ scholars, who can apply to both universities (unless the potential organ scholar is applying for Medicine, in which case they can only choose one of the two to which to apply).

5. Should I choose Oxford or Cambridge?

- You ought to try to visit both and see which one you prefer, as both cities and universities have a very different dynamic. You should also consider which course you prefer eg. History at Oxford or History at Cambridge.

6. What can I study?

- You will find the most up-to-date list of subjects on <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses-listing> and <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/courses>

Oxford	Cambridge
Archaeology and Anthropology	Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic
Biochemistry (Molecular and Cellular)	Archaeology
Biology	Architecture
Biomedical Sciences	Asian and Middle Eastern Studies
Chemistry	Chemical Engineering
Classical Archaeology and Ancient History	Classics
Classics	Economics
Classics and English	Education
Classics and Modern Languages	Engineering
Classics and Oriental Studies	English
Computer Science	Geography
Computer Science and Philosophy	History
Earth Sciences (Geology)	History and Modern Languages
Economics and Management	History and Politics
Engineering Science	History of Art
English Language and Literature	Human, Social, and Political Sciences
English and Modern Languages	Land Economy
European and Middle Eastern Languages	Law
Fine Art	Linguistics
Geography	Mathematics
History	Medicine
History (Ancient and Modern)	Modern and Medieval Languages (MML)
History and Economics	Music
History and English	Natural Sciences
History and Modern Languages	Philosophy
History and Politics	Psychological and Behavioural Sciences
History of Art	Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion
Human Sciences	Veterinary Medicine
Law (Jurisprudence)	
Materials Science	
Mathematics	
Mathematics and Computer Science	
Mathematics and Philosophy	
Mathematics and Statistics	
Medicine	
Modern Languages	
Modern Languages and Linguistics	
Music	
Oriental Studies	
Philosophy and Modern Languages	
Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE)	
Philosophy and Theology	
Physics	
Physics and Philosophy	
Psychology (Experimental)	
Psychology, Philosophy and Linguistics	
Religion and Oriental Studies	
Theology and Religion	
All Colleges offer places in MOST subjects, but CHECK that your College of choice offers the subject you want.	

7. What factors are they taking into account when considering candidates and making their decisions?

- Top grades at GCSE and top A-Level predictions
- The subjects you are taking – check the website carefully to ensure that you are taking the subjects required by the university for that course
- UCAS reference
- Personal statement (often used to guide some questions at interview)
- Submitted work (often used as the starting point for an interview; also shows the tutors what you are doing in class and how the teachers are helping you)
- Test results (if applicable)
- Interview

8. Extra-curricular activities

- Oxbridge are not interested in your Grade 8 exams, Duke of Edinburgh, sports teams, plays etc.; **they are only interested in your academic credentials.**
- They want to see **super-curricular activities** instead – going beyond the syllabus and taking opportunities to extend your understanding and learning.
- You will need to demonstrate how your super-curricular activities and work experience have equipped you with the skills needed for the course.

9. What about Colleges?

- Oxford and Cambridge are both composed of over thirty separate **Colleges**.
- They vary in size, location, wealth and facilities. Some colleges are over 700 years old, some are 30 years old.
- Students live in College and it is the base for tutorials/supervisions.
- All Colleges offer places in **MOST** subjects, but **CHECK** that your College offers the subject you want.
- Whilst you can choose, there will be a few at each university to which you will not be eligible to apply (some only accept graduates).
- **Don't stress over it.**
- Good ways to choose a College: visit some (Easter or summer holidays?). **Where do you feel at home?** 'Instinct is a good guide'.
- Oxford say 'Our advice is not to worry too much about choosing a College' and Cambridge say 'Don't agonise too long over choosing a College. They have many more similarities than differences'.
- Don't discount single sex Colleges (Newnham and Murray Edwards at Cambridge are all-female colleges) – lectures, practicals and seminars are mixed and attended by students from all Colleges and male friends are welcome in women's Colleges.
- If you really can't decide, you can make an **open application** which means you do not specify a college on your application – there is no stigma attached to this and it will not affect your chances of getting in.
- At Cambridge, interviewers will not ask you why you applied to a specific College so as not to discriminate against those who made open applications.

- Don't discount the newer Colleges.
- About a quarter of applicants receive an offer from a College to which they did not initially apply.
- *Where else to look:*
- <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/colleges/choosing-a-college?wssl=1>
- <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/colleges/choosing-a-college>
- **Best advice?** Visit the university and go round as many Colleges as you can.

Can I play the statistics and choose a college which has received fewer applications?

- There's not much point in bothering to do this. Bear in mind that the colleges are after the best people they can get so **'colleges would rather take a stronger candidate who applied to another college first choice than a weaker candidate who applied to them direct' (Admissions Tutor, Robinson College, Cambridge).**
- A spreadsheet allows colleges to compare applicants across all colleges for a subject so that colleges can work out what sort of standard their applicants are and whether they are of the university-wide standard. This includes all data. Those accepting students thus have some sense of the gathered field and whether their applicants are up to the mark – have a look at <https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/apply/statistics>
- Both universities also 'pool' good candidates: Cambridge have a Winter Pool system, which happens in January, whilst Oxford pools and makes the decisions before offers are made in January.

10. Choral and organ scholarships

- **It is a myth that applying for a choral scholarship will increase your chances of getting in academically: it won't.**
- The tutors are highly unlikely to know whether or not you have applied for a choral scholarship and are not interested anyway: they are interested in your academics and, if you do not make the grade academically, you will not get in.

Organ scholarships

- Most Oxbridge Colleges have two organ scholars at any one time; the organ scholars may be responsible for the running of the choir, or there may be a professional Director of Music as well.
- Levels of commitment may vary from one to seven services a week: research carefully. You should also bear in mind that not all Colleges will have vacancies each year.
- You do not have to read Music, although you should check that the subject you wish to study is permitted.
- **Both Oxford and Cambridge have a 1st September deadline for organ scholarship applicants and you should check the websites for application details and specific forms.**
- More information can be found at

<http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/musicawards/organ.html> and
<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/choral-and-organ-awards/organ-awards>

Choral scholarships

- These are not available at all Colleges: you will need to check the websites.
- Levels of commitment may vary from one to seven services a week: research carefully. You should also bear in mind that not all Colleges will have vacancies for your voice-part each year.
- Only men can apply for choral scholarships at Magdalen, New, Christ Church (Oxford), and St John's and King's (Cambridge).
- Differences in the application process:
 - o **Oxford**: the application deadline is **September 1st**. Choral trials then take place in September, well before the academic interviews. If you are successful, you will receive a notification from the college that you are of the requisite standard to receive a choral scholarship, but this is of course dependent on the academic interviews. Once you have gained your academic place, the College will then confirm your choral scholarship. It is therefore entirely possible that you could be in the running to receive a choral scholarship and then not be offered a place academically.
 - o **Cambridge**: there are no choral trials before the academic interviews. All successful applicants to Cambridge will be asked whether they wish to apply for a Choral Award; the deadline for this is generally around **February 15th**, but **check websites as some colleges have an earlier deadline**. You may then be invited to choral trials in February/March.
- More information can be found at:
<http://www.study.cam.ac.uk/undergraduate/apply/musicawards/choral.html>
<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/applying-to-oxford/choral-and-organ-awards/choral-awards>

11. How does the application process work?

- **If you are applying to either Oxford or Cambridge, your application will go off earlier than those of your friends. The Oxbridge deadline is 15th October and Dean Close usually sends forms off earlier than that.**
- Once **Cambridge** has received your application, they will send you the Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ). The deadline for this is usually around **October 22nd**.
- You may then be invited to interview. Interview dates can be found on the university website, but usually fall in or around the first week of December.
- Decision letters/e-mails will usually come through early in January (usually the second week of January).
- For **Cambridge**, one of three things will happen: you will be accepted, rejected or **pooled**. If you are pooled, it means other colleges are considering your application. You may be offered a place from another college (possibly requiring you to return to Cambridge in early January for another interview) or you may be rejected.

- If you have applied to Oxford, you will either be accepted or rejected – Oxford do pool, but this happens and decisions are made before the offers are made.

12. Do I need to take an Admissions Test?

- Many subjects require subject-specific aptitude tests – you can find an up-to-date list by looking online.
- The school will enter you for these tests, which are sat in school. The test date is usually around the start of November or the very end of October. This is usually during the Dean Close half term.
- Past papers can be found online (<https://www.admissionstesting.org/for-test-takers/>)
- Medics and vets will need to sit the BMAT, which is also used for some other universities.

13. Will an EPQ help my chances of getting an offer?

- Cambridge 'like it too much to make it part of the offer'! They like the opportunity for students to do some independent research and stretch themselves. However, just having done one is not enough – it's more about what they have learnt from doing the EPQ.
- If you have done one, you can ask the college to which you are applying if you can submit a section alongside any written work required. They may well say yes.

14. Will doing four A-Levels help my chances?

- Not necessarily. 3 is absolutely fine. Beware of spreading yourself too thinly. Better grades in fewer subjects might be a better idea...

15. What about interviews?

Notes from 'Preparing for Oxford Interviews' (Kate Burn, Student Recruitment Officer, Oxford), given at CLC 17.10.12

General

- The interviews are important because all the candidates 'look the same on paper'. Oxford interview about 70% of applicants; however, it is 'unlikely' that any one element of the application (eg. the interview) will swing the decision on its own merit.
- **The interview timetable will be available to view on the website when the time comes.**
- Those candidates who do not have tests and do not have to submit written work will probably hear whether they have got an interview earlier than those who do have tests/have to submit written work.
- The interviews will have an entirely academic focus.
- An interview is about 20 minutes or so.

- The interview is 'the last piece in the jigsaw rather than the final hurdle' (Cambridge Teachers' Workshop). Roughly 3 candidates are interviewed for each place and **everything** is considered when deciding who will receive offers.
- Don't worry about eye contact etc. this is not 'a test of how applicants speak, dress, sit, or shake hands' (Cambridge Teachers' Workshop). Applicants don't have to be very fluent in how they speak and don't have to make eye contact.
- Very common criticism on interview feedback is 'Would not listen' to the interviewer trying to help them. **Interactivity, flexibility, and being willing to learn and be guided are very important.**
- 'The worst thing you can do for those worried about interviews is to over-prepare'. 'Too much preparation can be a bad thing.' (Cambridge Teachers' Workshop). Applicants have to respond to the questions they are asked rather than the questions they want to answer.
- **The interview is an important part of the process, but it is not the be-all and end-all.**

What happens at an interview? What are the tutors looking for?

- **Interviews replicate tutorials.** Tutors are looking for:
 - o *Independent thought*
 - o *Academic potential and ability*
 - o *The selection criteria for a subject/the university (look at the website)*
 - o *Commitment to study*
 - o *Enthusiasm for your subject*
 - o *Engagement with new ideas*
- In preparation, think about:
 - o *Recent academic work*
 - o *Wider reading*
 - o *Your subject in the wider world*
 - o *Any questions you might have (you do not HAVE to ask a question. Do not ask a question which is answered on the website)*
- **You need to have read material SINCE your personal statement and have opinions on the new material.**
- **Know your personal statement. Anything can be a point of discussion, even if you did not see it when writing the statement. Be prepared to defend and evidence everything you say.**
- You might be asked which subject(s) or elements of that subject you are enjoying.
- **Do not be too prepared or drilled.** It is a **discussion** and not a quick-fire answer round. Follow where the tutors are leading: let them push you out of your comfort zone.
- Every new interview is a chance to impress.
- Remember the tutor may well be a bit nervous too!
- **'Being pushed very hard is a good sign.' 'You're meant to not be terribly sure' in an interview.**
- **Articulate your thought process:** don't sit in silence. **'The more you talk, the more we can see what's going on in your brain...sitting there in silence is the worst thing you can do.'**
- **Be teachable:** don't stick to your guns; be flexible.

Maths/Sciences

- For **scientists**, a certain level of knowledge is expected. The questions are then like ladders: the first rung is easy, to get you going, and then they get harder.
- **The first question may actually be an easy question (not a trick question!).**
- **Sciences:** usually 26 hours in and out. You will probably have more than one interview in more than one college: this is in order to spread the quantity and the quality around the university.

Arts

- For **arts subjects**, the interviewer may 'lead you into designing a part of the interview yourself'.
- For **arts subjects**, you may well have two interviews: the first one may be to get you talking with a wide-ranging question at the end to get you thinking.
- **Arts:** interview process may take longer.

Types of Question

- Analysis of a prepared text/picture/object
- For **Maths and Sciences**, building on existing knowledge and/or looking at it in a new way
- Problem-solving/abstract concepts eg. Law tends to be scenario-based. You may be given some law to apply to a particular situation.
- **The interview is not about what you know but what you think.**
- You will hear in early January whether you have been successful: you may be made an offer by a college which has not seen you.
- **'the best people get in regardless of choice of college'**

16. What can I do next?

THREE THINGS: READ, THINK, DISCUSS

- Let your tutor and the head of the relevant department know that you are planning to apply so that they can advise you on how to start preparing.
- **Get reading and thinking.** You cannot do all of the preparation in the Michaelmas term of U6.
- Get used to TALKING about your subject.
- If you are not doing so already, start keeping a **notebook** about your subject: in there can go details of reading, lectures, theatre visits, discussions etc. Be sure not to write down just what happened but *what you got from it*. Start being *critical*. This will help when you come to writing your personal statement.
- Make the most of all extension opportunities offered, both in and outside of school, even if it is not necessarily your desired subject area.

- Make the effort to find out more not just about your subject, but the world around you: newspapers, reviews, visits, TV programmes, radio programmes. You will be surprised at the links you can make. Listen to BBC Radio 4 (the Today programme is excellent); watch a documentary (<http://www.youtube.com/education> might be a good source or look through BBC iPlayer/4oD/BBC Channel 4). You can access thousands of Oxford University lectures on <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/> **No academic subject exists in a vacuum.**
- The 'A Very Short Introduction' guides are EXCELLENT: they do exactly what it says on the tin. There are lots of them in the library.
- For **Sciences**, it's about developing fluency in methods and trying to break down the silos of A-Level classes – can you knit the subjects back together? The more Maths you do, the better!

17. Thoughts on Wider Reading

- 1. Understand why your subject is important**
 - Be clear about what your subject has to offer society
 - It may help to bring economic and technological benefits; it may help us to understand how humans behave; it may be worthwhile studying in its own right
- 2. Your subject cannot tell you the whole story**
 - What other disciplines may you need alongside your subject? For example, biology tells us something about human behaviour, but we need psychology, sociology and anthropology to get a fuller picture
- 3. Be open-minded and flexible**
 - 'A little learning is a dangerous thing': the more you know, the more you will realise there IS to know!
 - For scientists, Ben Goldacre's book *Bad Science* and the website may be of interest
- 4. Do not believe all that you are told: be sceptical**
 - Constantly question views, theories and opinions you are faced with
 - Test every idea to destruction to find the ones which really stand up
 - Understand that what we currently think is only the best knowledge we have at the time
 - Don't be easily persuaded
- 5. Be interested in discussing ideas**
 - Be enthusiastic about debates and express your ideas
 - Get used to being challenged: it is only in discussion and debate that we really clarify what we think
- 6. Be aware of debates and issues in your subject**
 - Where do you stand on those? Be aware of different perspectives
- 7. Read widely and keep up to date with your subject**
 - Read magazines/newspapers/reviews/websites – go beyond the syllabus
- 8. Follow things up on your own initiative**
 - If you want to be spoon-fed, Oxbridge is not for you
- 9. Understand the history of your subject**
 - How has it changed and developed?
 - Who are some of the key figures?
- 10. Write simply and clearly**

18. Resources

- Isaac Physics (and website marks the questions). Great platform. FREE.
- BMJ
- JSTOR
- New Scientist
- Enrich
- Access to Further Mathematics
- Nature
- IwanttostudyENGINEERING.com
- iTunes U
- Lego mind storm (for Computer Science, Engineering applicants). If they are learning from it, it's not a gimmick and it's a good thing.

19. Where can I find out more information?

- The Oxford and Cambridge websites have plenty of information (www.ox.ac.uk and www.cam.ac.uk).
- HoDs, your Tutor, Mr Milne and Miss O'Neill can also advise you.
- Talk to those who were interviewed this year
- [Feedback forms](#) completed by the last five years' worth of candidates about the interviews are available on the pupil drive: this will give you some idea of how you can prepare, possible questions you might be asked, and general good advice.

