

INTERVIEWS

This section aims to explain how Oxford interviews work, the part they play in the admissions process and what you can do to best support your candidates in preparing for interview. Please remember that the interview is just **one** aspect of an application, as tutors will also consider:

- examination results,
- predicted grades,
- personal statement,
- academic reference,
- admissions tests or written work, if they are required for the subject.
- contextual data

HOW WILL MY STUDENT KNOW IF HE/SHE HAS BEEN SHORTLISTED FOR INTERVIEW?

- Many excellent candidates apply each year, and most of them have a good personal statement, a glowing reference and top predicted grades. With many applications for each place at Oxford, it just isn't possible to interview everyone. Tutors review each UCAS application, along with any admissions tests or written work required for the subject, and then decide on a shortlist of candidates who will be invited to interview. We interview those who we believe have the greatest academic potential to succeed at Oxford.
- For some courses, over 90% of candidates are shortlisted for interview. In other subjects, particularly those that are most heavily oversubscribed, a smaller proportion of candidates will be shortlisted – in some cases less than 50%.
- Broadly speaking, we interview approximately three candidates per place for each course. You can find the short listing statistics and overall success rates for each course in the undergraduate prospectus.
- Sadly, this does mean that some candidates will be disappointed, as their applications will not be considered beyond the short listing stage. However, it also means that those candidates who have been identified as having the strongest ability and potential may have more than one interview at their first college, and increasingly at more than one college. If your candidate is unsuccessful, it is possible to request feedback, but this is not available until January.
- Towards the end of November or in early December your student will receive an email or a letter indicating whether or not they have been invited for interview. If they have been invited, the letter or email will include practical details of the interview and further information.
- If students holding a passport from the European Economic Area are shortlisted and invited to interview in December, they must attend the interview in Oxford if they would like their application to be considered.

- Students holding a passport from a country outside the European Economic Area will be given the option to come to Oxford for interview. We understand that students from other parts of the world may not be able to travel to interview at short notice, or may experience difficulties in obtaining a visitor visa (if required). In this case the college which is considering their application may choose to interview them by telephone, video conference or over the internet through Skype, but such an interview cannot be guaranteed.
- All shortlisted applicants for Medicine and Fine Art will be invited to come to Oxford for an interview in December. If they are shortlisted, they must attend this interview in Oxford if they would like their application to be considered.
- Please note that your student will probably be interviewed at the college to which they applied, or the college to which they were allocated, if they made an open application. However, in some cases the application may be referred to another college. This can happen if a college is significantly oversubscribed for the particular subject that year, and will be made clear in the letter inviting the student to interview. This is not in any way an indication that we consider them a weaker candidate.
- In some subjects all shortlisted candidates will automatically be scheduled to have an interview at a second college prior to their arrival in Oxford. For other subjects, they may be offered the opportunity to have interviews at a second or even a third college.
- Please reassure students that if they are called for a second or third interview, this does not necessarily mean that they will not be offered a place at the first college, it just means that those additional colleges will also be considering them.

HOW CAN I BEST SUPPORT MY CANDIDATES IN PREPARING FOR INTERVIEW?

ACADEMIC SUPPORT:

SHOULD WE PROVIDE MOCK INTERVIEWS AND HOW HELPFUL DO YOU THINK THIS PROCESS IS?

- Certainly giving candidates the opportunity to discuss their motivation for the course and their academic interest in the subject for which they are intending to apply will be of great benefit to them.
- Often students are experienced in expressing themselves coherently and with enthusiasm on paper (as will be demonstrated in their personal statement), but some students may have greater difficulty in vocalising their opinions and academic passions in an academic interview context.
- A mock interview will help the candidate to gain more experience of talking about themselves and their academic interests in an unfamiliar environment.
- You might consider organising one practice interview for your student with a subject specialist and another one with someone the student does not know. You could also contact other schools in your area and arrange to do mock interviews for each other's students.
- However, drilling students and asking them to memorise large amounts of pre-rehearsed material or answers will be of little use to them in the interview context, as the Oxford tutors leading the interviews are able to spot this kind of

approach very quickly.

- Students will be required to demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of the proposed subject area if they have studied the subject at school or college. A solid knowledge of the field will be required, particularly in science subjects, so students should aim to revise topics they have covered at school or college in the past year, such as any relevant AS material for example.
- During the interview, tutors will be keen to direct students onto areas with which they are perhaps more unfamiliar in order to ascertain how they think. They want to know whether or not the critical responses students have are in fact their own, and whether they have an understanding of the issues involved which extends beyond a surface knowledge of the subject area.

IS THERE ANY SPECIFIC READING MY STUDENTS SHOULD DO BEFORE INTERVIEW?

- Students should be advised to read their personal statement and any submitted written work before coming to interview as preliminary interview questions may be based on this material.
- Candidates are encouraged to read around their subject and on topics outside their school or college study, as well as developing and extending their knowledge on topics which may have interested them within their A-level (or equivalent) course.
- Departments have provided us with suggested reading lists for prospective students. Please note that these lists are **not** exhaustive and are designed as possible starting points for further enquiry.
- Candidates should develop their own passion and commitment for their subject and should undertake further reading which fosters that interest and will be an indicator of their motivation for the proposed course of study at interview.
- If you know your student has enjoyed a particular aspect of their subject course with you at school, then we would also encourage you to suggest further reading for them.

WHAT DOES 'READING AROUND THE SUBJECT' MEAN?

- Candidates are advised to read widely around their chosen subject, including newspaper articles, websites, journals, magazines and other publications that relate to their subject.
- Reading widely on its own is not enough; students should be encouraged to take a critical view of ideas and arguments that they encounter at school or college, or in the media and think about all sides of any debate.
- In a literature subject, if a student has enjoyed a particular book as part of the course, they may wish to read other books by the same author, or works written in the same time period which deal with similar issues. Drawing comparisons between books they have read for their course and those they have read for pleasure is also a useful exercise.
- An applicant for Biology, for example, might want to follow new developments in their field by reading New Scientist or National Geographic.

WHAT ELSE CAN MY STUDENTS DO?

- In addition to reading, students might also wish to watch relevant TV documentaries or films related to their proposed area of study.
- Another way for your students to demonstrate their passion for the subject area could involve visiting museum exhibitions or attending public lectures.
- They may also wish to explore examples of their subject area in the wider world, such as taking an interest in the scientific or economic theories that underlie news stories.

HOW CAN STUDENTS SHOW THEIR PASSION FOR A SUBJECT THEY HAVEN'T STUDIED BEFORE?

- If a student is intending to begin a new subject from scratch at Oxford, they may wish to undertake some preparatory reading to explore their interest in that area and to ascertain whether it might be the right course for them.
- If they decide to apply for a subject they have not studied before, candidates should have carefully thought about the reasons for choosing this new subject, however in-depth knowledge of the field is not a requirement.
- When tutors are assessing candidates who intend to study a subject they have not formally studied at school, they are predominantly looking at the candidate's skills and aptitudes rather than any specific knowledge.
- For example, a student applying to study Italian without having studied it at school or college might want to read some short stories by Buzzati or Calvino in translation, watch an Italian film with subtitles or read some Italian poetry in a bilingual edition.

PRACTICAL SUPPORT

- Encourage your students to look at the interviews timetable which is available here in the autumn. If they are applying to Oxford, they should keep their subject timeslot free of other commitments. Note that once an interview has been scheduled, it is **not** normally possible to change the date or time.
- Colleges aim to inform applicants by post or email whether or not they have been invited to interview in late November or early December.
- Students holding a passport from the EEA (European Economic Area) will be expected to travel to Oxford for interview and accommodation and food is provided free of charge in the college.
- Students holding a passport from a country outside the EEA will be given the option to come to Oxford for interview. We understand that students from other parts of the world may not be able to travel to interview at short notice, or may experience difficulties in obtaining a visitor visa (if required). In this case the college which is considering their application may choose to interview them by telephone, video conference or over the internet through Skype, but such an interview cannot be guaranteed.

- All shortlisted applicants for Medicine and Fine Art will be invited to come to Oxford for an interview in December. If they are shortlisted, they must attend this interview in Oxford if they would like their application to be considered.
- In most cases, students will be in Oxford for between two and four days and being at interview may involve a student being away from school for up to four days, including travel time.
- Students with disabilities should inform their college of any particular requirements well in advance of their interview, so that any appropriate arrangements can be made.
- Interviews in Oxford take place in December, after the end of term, when many students will have returned home for Christmas. However, each college makes sure that there are plenty of undergraduates around to provide information and to help candidates find their way around. These undergraduates will have recently experienced the interview process themselves, and are very well placed to help and advise your students.
- Students should wear whatever clothes they feel comfortable in. Most tutors will not dress formally, and it is not necessary for the candidate to do so. It is cold in Oxford in December, so students are advised to bring warm clothing and suitable footwear.
- We recommend that they bring copies of any written work submitted, and a copy of their personal statement, as tutors may refer to these during the interview.
- Candidates are advised to look at and be confident about the content of these parts of the application. It becomes obvious very quickly to an interviewer if a candidate has not read something they have mentioned in their personal statement or is unfamiliar with the texts or concepts arising from submitted written work.
- As there can be a great deal of waiting around during the interview period, it is a good idea to encourage candidates to bring some reading with them, perhaps even some school work, as they will only spend a relatively small amount of their time in Oxford actually in interviews or taking tests. There will also be plenty of opportunity to spend time with other interview candidates as well as current undergraduates.
- It is advisable that they bring a mobile, along with its charger, so that the college can contact them, if they need to.

AT INTERVIEW

HOW MANY INTERVIEWS WILL THERE BE AND HOW LONG WILL THEY LAST?

- The interviews will usually be conducted by two academic tutors. These are people who are experts in an aspect of the degree course for which the candidate is applying.
- Most candidates will normally have at least two interviews of 20-30 minutes each.

WHAT FORM WILL THE INTERVIEW TAKE?

- An interview will usually begin with something familiar, such as a question arising from the candidate's personal statement or written work and become progressively more challenging as it moves in to more unfamiliar territory. Interviews are designed to stretch a candidate and assess their potential, but tutors are not there to catch someone out.
- A pictorial or textual stimulus, such as a graph, diagram, a passage of text, or item may be used as a springboard for discussion in the interview. These exercises will not be taken from school syllabuses, but are rather designed to see whether candidates are able to respond to new material in a critical and informed way.

ARE THERE ANY 'STANDARD OXFORD INTERVIEW QUESTIONS'?

- We recommend that candidates think about the obvious questions that are often asked at the beginning of an interview to help them settle down, and think how they might answer them. They should think specifically about why they want to study at Oxford and why have they chosen their particular subject. At this point, tutors may also draw from parts of the candidate's personal statement. Note that they may not necessarily be asked these questions as a matter of course.
- Tutors are advised not to ask why students have chosen that particular college; candidates may interview at a college to which they have been allocated as part of an open allocation, or may be called during the interview period to interview at a college to which they did not directly apply.

ARE EXTRA-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT?

- Please remember that tutors make their decisions based on academic abilities and potential alone: extra-curricular activities do not form part of the selection criteria in any subject.
- However, they may ask a question or two about extra-curricular activities, particularly at the start of the interview, as the candidate is settling in. They may ask the student why they have enjoyed a particular activity and what they have learnt from it. They may also be interested in how you the candidate balanced their time between studies and other activities.
- Tutors may also ask questions regarding a candidate's supercurricular activities, i.e. extra-curricular activities which contribute to the candidate's enthusiasm for and engagement in their subject area.

WHAT PRACTICAL ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR CANDIDATES IN ANSWERING QUESTIONS?

- Don't overthink! Candidates should take a moment before responding, but should be urged to practice 'thinking out loud'.
- Tutors are not concerned entirely with a candidate reaching 'the right answer', but are genuinely interested in how they think and what they do with what they know, rather than simply finding out about their knowledge base.
- If a candidate uses theoretical terms in the interview, or if they have made reference to them in the personal statement or written work, they should be able to define them.
- Merely reciting terms, or name-dropping so-called 'important' works or ideas is of little use in itself, unless the candidate

can justify their point of view or actively engage with a received idea.

- For example, if an Economics candidate says they have an interest in game theory, they should be able to qualify that and explain what in particular about that aspect of Economics attracts them. Equally, it is not helpful if an English candidate states that Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* is a striking model of a Modernist text, if they are unable to talk about what they think Modernism actually is.

WHAT ARE TUTORS LOOKING FOR IN THE INTERVIEW?

- Evidence of a solid academic base (particularly in the sciences) and demonstration of an interest in and enthusiasm for their subject. Students should be encouraged to revise recent material they have covered at school (such as at AS, for example) and to think about the connections between topics and theories. Tutors are not interested in students who atomise knowledge.
- Demonstration of an ability to think beyond the confines of what they have studied at school.
- Excellent grades alone are not enough to secure a place at Oxford. Even those students who have an exceptional record in exams may not have the intellectual curiosity and independence of thought necessary to succeed at the University.
- When assessing candidates, tutors are essentially looking for those students who they believe have the potential to excel in the interactive one-to-one teaching system tutorial system at Oxford.

HOW ARE INTERVIEWS ASSESSED?

- Those interviewing for the first time at Oxford are required to undertake training before they are permitted to interview candidates, and all interviewers will be familiar with the selection criteria for their subject and the modes of assessment involved.
- Pre-interview assessment takes place when tutors evaluate the candidate's UCAS application, results of any tests and the quality of the written work.
- At interview, candidates are assessed according to the selection criteria for that subject and tutors will be looking for academic rigour, independence of thought and intellectual curiosity as well of evidence of passion for their subject. Subject-specific selection criteria are available through our website.

AFTER INTERVIEWS

WHEN WILL THE CANDIDATES FIND OUT WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED?

- Normally, colleges will send candidates a letter of their decision by Christmas. Note that college admissions offices are closed over the Christmas and New Year period. The letter the student will receive will explain one of three things:
- They are made an offer of a place to study their subject at a particular college. If they have already completed all their

examinations, this offer will be unconditional.

- If they have not yet finished their final examinations, the offer will probably be conditional upon their achieving certain grades, usually A*A*A-AAA at A-level, or equivalent qualifications.
- The offer may specify that they need to achieve certain grades in particular subjects and may include a requirement for evidence of proficiency in the English language for candidates who have only recently been educated in English.
- They are made an 'open offer', which means that they have an offer from Oxford and are guaranteed a place if they meet the terms of any conditional offer. However, the college they will attend has not yet been specified, and will not be decided until after their final examination results have been published.
- Their application has, unfortunately, not been successful. For many applicants who have, until now, been one of the most academically successful in their school or college, it can be very dispiriting to not get an offer. In recent years, over 75% of those who applied did not receive an offer; and it is probable, if they have selected their other courses wisely, that they will go on to study at another excellent university.
- In a few years' time they may wish to consider applying to Oxford for further study after they have completed their first degree elsewhere. We often see candidates who were unsuccessful in their undergraduate applications here making successful applications for graduate study.
- If you wish to investigate the reasons why your student's application was not successful or you would like further information, you may lodge a request for feedback.
- All enquiries about admissions decisions are dealt with on an individual basis between **applicants** (or their **school/college**) and the appropriate **Oxford college**. This will be the college to which they initially applied, or to which they were subsequently assigned, whether as a result of making an open application or through reallocation.
- Requests for feedback received before January will be dealt with in the New Year. Colleges will not normally provide feedback where the request is made after 30 April. This means that colleges are unable to provide feedback during the shortlisting and interviewing period.
- Feedback may be provided to the author of the school/college reference (the referee) or to the Head or Principal of the school/college, either in general terms or in relation to a specific application. Feedback will only be given in relation to an applicant where the applicant has given permission under the Data Protection Act (normally if they have ticked the relevant box on the online UCAS application).

HEAR IT FROM THE TUTORS THEMSELVES.....

WHAT ARE MODERN LANGUAGES TUTORS LOOKING FOR AT INTERVIEW?

- '[In preparing for an Oxford interview] I would want to emphasise the importance of reading reasonably widely [...] I'm interested in candidates who enjoy the challenge of more 'difficult' reading, books that require an active engagement and stimulate an enquiring response.'

- ‘The candidates who have thought about how languages work and are intrigued by how meaning is generated develop into more sophisticated modern linguists. I’m looking for candidates who notice the operations, anomalies and subtleties of language and find these exciting.’
- ‘I am hoping for genuine interest in France and the Francophone world – past and present. [When talking about France] they [should aim to] show an awareness of social, political and cultural difference.’
- ‘I’d recommend that candidates be prepared to convince us that what they are looking for in a degree goes a long way beyond a desire to speak and write correct French.’

(Tutor in French, Oxford)

WHAT TO EXPECT AT A LAW INTERVIEW

- Students should expect the interview to be intellectually rigorous and challenging. They will have to think on their feet and explain the reasoning behind their answers in a clear and concise fashion.
- If they are given a passage to read in advance, or a document to use in the interview, they should pay close attention to the text when framing their answers.
- No prior specific knowledge of Law is expected or required at interview, so they don’t have to worry about encountering legal terminology.
- Read the Law Faculty’s undergraduate admissions criteria so that you understand what qualities the admissions tutors are looking for at interview, and how they assess the application overall.
- As with all Oxford interviews, the Law interview is designed to assess a candidate’s ability and potential, regardless of background and experience.

(Dr. Katharine Grevling, Tutor in Law, Magdalen College)

TOP 5 TIPS FOR ENGINEERING INTERVIEWS

- Know your Maths. It’s at the very heart of our course because it enables you, as an engineer, to predict the behaviour of your designs, and to analyse the performance of the finished products so that you can improve them.
- Know your Physics. Much of the first year of our course builds directly on school Physics, particularly mechanics. As an engineer, you will apply the underlying principles of Physics to the solving of problems in the real world.
- Know your Maths and your Physics. Yes, Maths and Physics are so important that they’re worth listing twice! Know everything you’ve covered, not just the most recent topics. Much of your interview will be devoted to Maths and Physics questions.

- Be curious about the engineering content of the world around you. How do things work? What are they made from? How are they made? How, as an engineer, could you improve them?
- Express yourself clearly. As a student, you will discuss problems and solutions with your tutors and with other students. As an engineer, you will discuss your ideas and designs with other engineers, and with those who will ultimately benefit from them.

(Dr. Peter McFadden, Tutor in Engineering, Jesus College)

WHAT ARE ENGLISH TUTORS LOOKING FOR AT INTERVIEW?

Successful candidates are likely to show a combination of these qualities:

- Reading beyond the syllabus
This is the most basic way to show the interviewers that ‘passion’ for English that is so often asserted in the personal statement on the UCAS application. It doesn’t have to be reading calculated to impress because it’s how candidates can talk about what they’ve read that’s important. So popular literature is fine but some awareness of literary history is always welcome.
- Enjoyment of discussion
Interviewers will try in some way to show candidates what tutorial teaching is like during an interview: leading them into discussion, asking open-ended questions, pushing at the boundaries of their knowledge. Teaching at Oxford University is based around discussion so candidates should like to talk, be able to express themselves with some ease and enjoy the exchange of ideas
- Responsiveness
This really encompasses evidence of intellectual flexibility (is a candidate prepared to modify an idea as a result of discussion?) with attentiveness both to questions and to the nuances/suggestiveness of literary texts. Careful listening and reading is as important as being able to talk about texts. It’s always good when candidates are prepared to argue their points but rigid adherence to ideas isn’t what we’re looking for: it’s alright for candidates to admit they don’t know something or that they’ve changed their minds.
- Thoughtfulness
Thoughtfulness is shown in the ability to move beyond observation of (say) plot and characters to demonstrate an ability to analyse literary texts. More succinctly: to be interested in the question ‘why?’ rather than the question ‘how?’ It also involves an enjoyment of the process of academic inquiry and evidence that candidates have the intellectual commitment, discipline and stamina to flourish at Oxford.
- Making creative connections
The study of English Literature wonderfully combines rigour and creativity. In interviews we try and establish whether candidates have this combination by encouraging them to make connections, not only between texts they’ve read but also to show that they’ve thought about how the study of literature fits into social, cultural and political life [...] how aware are they of cultural shifts; current media interest in literary matters and, so on?

(Dr Lynn Robson, Tutor in English, Regent’s Park College)