

Preparation for Applying to Oxford or Cambridge

Subject Selection

It is essential that you apply for a subject that you are really passionate about. Top universities are looking for academic ability, coupled with a genuine love of intellectual endeavour for its own sake. It is impossible to show the required commitment if your heart is not in it.

Choice of College

Although it is possible to make an 'open' application, most applicants like to select a college. A great deal of thought often goes into this, but, in the end, it is relatively unimportant. You may like to think, however, about some practicalities. Do you wish to live in the city centre, or in a quieter location? Is your chosen college close to the lecture theatres in your subject, or will you need a bicycle?

Personal Statement

A lot of advice is available regarding Personal Statements. Remember that Oxford and Cambridge are looking for candidates with real intellectual flair and a genuine appetite for their chosen subjects. Think substance, not style. The main focus of your Personal Statement should be academic matters, not your co-curricular interests.

Pre-Interview Tests

Applicants for many subjects, particularly at Oxford, are required to sit a pre-interview test. These are normally sat here in school, but candidates must be entered in good time. Test requirements change from one year to the next, so you must take responsibility for finding out the details. It is not too early to start looking at past papers and become familiar with the kind of question that you will be asked.

Intellectual Maturity

Anything that you can do to develop your intellectual sophistication is worthwhile. For many subjects, you can never do too much reading. Anybody, for example, who is serious about studying English will surely like nothing more than reading quality literature and poetry! It is important, however, to think analytically about what you are reading and, if at all possible, engage in discussion with other people in order to articulate the thoughts and ideas that you have had. Oxford and Cambridge both base their education on intense tutorials in which students are put under a great deal of intellectual pressure. The interview process mimics this as they are looking for candidates who will thrive, not wilt, in that very specific environment. A scientist can also usefully find out more by reading – there are a large number of excellent books that would be of interest to any aspirant scientist. It is also worth sharpening your problem-solving skills, perhaps by starting to prepare for the pre-interview tests.

It is sometimes believed that each step of the application process is a hurdle to be overcome. Think instead of each step being a piece in a jigsaw: the decision to accept or reject is based on the overall picture.