



Guide to applying for Oxford and Cambridge



Should you apply to Oxford and Cambridge?

Oxford and Cambridge universities, also known collectively as Oxbridge, hold a special place in the imagination. However, they also have some popular, and sometimes false, stereotypes about the kind of students that are admitted.

Oxford and Cambridge universities both emphasise that they seek to attract the best and brightest applicants regardless of background, and have rigorous and fair application procedures designed to let the best candidates shine.

For more information – read Oxford vs Cambridge (thecompleteuniversityguide.co.uk)

Choosing a course

Both Oxford and Cambridge agree that choosing the degree you wish to study, not which university you want to apply to, is the most important decision to make.

Make sure you read the course details carefully. You will be studying for several years, so it's vital to choose something you're truly passionate about.

Oxford and Cambridge tend to run traditional academic courses with an emphasis on small-group tuition, and assessment is more often based 100% on examinations.

Only a few professions require specific degrees, so keep an open mind and consider topics you've not directly studied before, as long as it'll help you to develop analytical abilities and skills attractive to future employers. Remember, you will be asked about your choice at the interview, so strong personal interest in the course is essential.

Choosing between Oxford and Cambridge

You can't apply to both Oxford and Cambridge in the same year, so you'll have to choose one or the other. Both universities are world-renowned in both arts and science subjects, so the decision is largely an individual one.

Cambridge usually comes above Oxford in the Complete University Guide rankings, but this is partly due to its subject mix. Some courses are offered at one of the universities, but not the other. It's important to be aware that courses with a similar title at the two universities may be different in content, so you should check the course details to see which one will suit you best.

Each university has a number of open days and events, and we strongly advise you to attend one before you make your choice.

What makes Oxford and Cambridge so special?

Both Oxford and Cambridge are based on a collegiate system and students at both universities benefit from personalised teaching in small groups with subject experts.

Collegiate system

Both universities are made up of individual colleges, as well as different academic departments. Academic departments are responsible for core teaching and assessment and colleges provide academic and pastoral support, and arrange small group tuition – sometimes with a tutor or supervisor from another college.

Each college will have a diverse range of students studying across a range of subject areas and academic levels.

The college system offers the benefits of a smaller, interdisciplinary academic college community while belonging to a large, internationally renowned university.

Each college offers the same excellent standard of teaching and the same high academic standards. You will have access to your college's facilities, such as an extensive library and IT provision, as well as the resources of the wider university.

You're able to specify a preferred college when you make your UCAS application, but your college choice doesn't really matter. Once you've submitted your UCAS application, you'll be committed to your choice of college, so do your research. However, you may be interviewed by more than one college and you may receive an offer from a different college than you applied to.

If you prefer not to choose a college, you can make an open application.

Teaching methods

Teaching methods are similar at both universities, with lectures, seminars, classes and laboratory work (as appropriate for your course). Oxbridge students also benefit from highly personalised teaching time with experts in their subject. Oxford calls them 'tutorials', while Cambridge calls them 'supervisions'.

You're required to prepare an essay, or another piece of work, in advance of these sessions and then meet with your tutor to discuss the work, perhaps with one or two other students. Sessions may happen as frequently as once or even twice each week, depending on your course.

Your Oxford or Cambridge application

As well as your academic ability and potential, admission tutors look at your skills and motivation to go beyond what's required for your current studies. For example, evidence you can study independently, are willing to embrace new ideas, and can explore and discuss ideas and opinions in a logical and considered way. Showing you have self-discipline is very important, as you'll need to manage your time well.

You must demonstrate how you have met the above criteria in your application.



Key stages of your application

- **Choose a course:** Check the specific details of what courses will cover
 - **Choose a college:** If you have no preference, make an 'open' application
 - **UCAS application:** The Oxbridge application deadline is earlier than the standard UCAS deadline, at 6pm (GMT) on 15 October each year, regardless of whether it falls on a weekend. This is the same deadline date as for Medicine, Dentistry and Vet Science
 - **University forms:** You may be required to complete one or more additional forms
 - **University tests:** For most subjects, additional tests will be required. They may take place prior to, or during your interview
 - **Written work:** You may be asked to submit some written work
 - **Interview:** If your application is shortlisted, you will be invited to an interview in December
 - **Decision:** You will know if you were successful by the end of January
- Additional elements of the application are covered in greater detail below.

Please note: Overseas students may have different deadlines to those for UK or EU students. Please check with the relevant university.

Application assessment

Many Oxbridge applicants are predicted to achieve top grades and have excellent references. So it's not possible for Oxford or Cambridge to select the best students based on their UCAS applications alone. Each university has a slightly different approach to differentiating between applicants.

Your application will be assessed on a combination of many factors, explained below.

Entry requirements

Make sure you expect to achieve the required grades for your chosen course. There may be specific subject requirements for particular courses, especially in the sciences.

Conditional offers for Oxford range between A*A*A and AAA (depending on the subject) at A Level or 38–40 in the IB, including core points. Certain grades may be required at Higher Level.

Cambridge usually requires A*A*A for most sciences courses and A*AA for arts courses or 40–42 in the IB, including core points, with 776 at Higher Level. AAA is usually required at Advanced Higher grade, for students in Scotland.

If you are taking A Levels in science-related subjects, you're expected to complete and pass the practical assessment.

You can check these in the course requirements on Oxford or Cambridge university websites. At Cambridge, subject requirements may also vary from one college to another.

SUBJECT	CAMBRIDGE	OXFORD
LAW	A*AA	AAA
MEDICINE	A*A*A	A*AA
ECONOMICS	A*A*A	A*AA
ENGINEERING	A*A*A	A*A*A

For other entry requirements, including IB, BTECs and Scottish Highers see our course search

 Complete University Guide

Personal statement

Your personal statement is a chance to show your potential to excel within the tutorial or supervision system.

When writing your personal statement you should:

- Show your commitment to your chosen subject and your independent study skills by exploring beyond what's required for the exam syllabus
- Demonstrate your self-motivation, your ability to plan, structure and research your work, and relate these to the skills required on your course
- Remember that your UCAS application is only for five universities, so your personal statement may have to apply to different courses

School or college reference

Your tutors will report your academic performance as part of your UCAS reference, including your predicted grades. This is also where some contextual information about you can be included.

University forms

Cambridge asks all applicants to complete an online Supplementary Application Questionnaire (SAQ). If you're applying from outside the EU, for graduate medicine, or for an organ scholarship, you will also need to complete the Cambridge Online Preliminary Application (COPA). Those taking a modular course are asked to report their uniform mark scheme (UMS) performance and AS Level grades (where available) in the SAQ. If you're taking linear qualifications, teachers will report your performance via your UCAS reference.

Oxford does not require you to complete any extra forms. However, for most courses, applicants are asked to take a test as part of the application. Tutors then shortlist applicants based on students' applications and performance in the test.

University tests

Most tests are held at schools or colleges before an interview. Applicants must be registered well in advance for tests by their assessment centre.

BMAT: All students applying for the standard medicine course (A100) at either university must register to take the BMAT as part of their application. At Oxford, candidates for the graduate entry medicine course (A101) and biomedical sciences (BC98) also require this test. Ensure you note the correct date for taking this test.

Oxford requires applicants to take written tests before an interview in most other subjects. Please note that separate registration is required in many cases.

Cambridge requires applicants to take pre-interview tests for around half of its courses. For other subjects, Cambridge requires a written test to be taken while at the university for the interview (if interviewed). You will not need to register for at-interview assessments.

Written work

Both universities require some applicants to send samples of written work as part of their application. Both will expect this work at different times, so double check the deadline when you apply to ensure you don't miss it.

Contextual data

Contextual data, or contextualisation, allow your circumstances to be considered and is intended to give a fair platform for applicants from differing backgrounds. While your academic performance is still the key factor, contextualisation allows the university to assess how your school performs, your socio-economic background and more. You can also provide this information as part of your personal statement, or the teacher's academic reference.

Both Cambridge and Oxford consider school performance and your location to help place your educational achievement into context when assessing applications. Your academic record may also be considered in the context of the normal performance of your school.

If you're applying to Cambridge, your teachers can submit an Extenuating Circumstances form directly to the university, providing information relating to your circumstances.

Oxford encourages teachers to include details of any special circumstances or other relevant information in the main UCAS application. If you demonstrate academic aptitude for Oxford, you're likely to be considered for an interview and seen in addition to students identified through the normal shortlisting process.

Interviews

Cambridge interviews around 75% of undergraduate applicants. At Oxford, where applications are around six per place, around half of all applicants are shortlisted for interview. For the most competitive degrees, the applicants who most closely meet the selection criteria may have multiple interviews.

The purpose and structure of interviews are very similar at both universities. Essentially, they are like a mini-tutorial or supervision, where the tutors will give you a small passage to read or perhaps set a small problem and then ask you to discuss it.

Contrary to many popular myths about the interviews, there are no tricks or mind games involved. The interview is for tutors to get a sense of how you react to new situations and how you process the information available.

It's not a matter of how quickly — or even whether — you arrive at a particular answer. There may not even be a right answer. The tutors just want to get an insight into how you think and how you apply your knowledge and skills.

Your performance at the interview alone does not determine whether you get offered a place; a variety of factors are considered, as outlined above. However, no commercial test will influence your application success, and neither university supports nor encourages such commercial enterprises.

Tips for applying

Do:

- Choose a course you are really passionate about
- Read widely around your chosen subject. Tutors have often devoted their life to their subject and they want to teach students who share their enthusiasm
- Practice talking about your subject and not just with your teachers and fellow students. Talking to non-experts is an excellent exercise as it gets you thinking in new ways and helps you to find new ways of expressing the concepts and issues involved

Don't:

- Stretch the truth on your application form. Tutors may ask you about anything you include in your application, so make sure it's all correct
- Spend too much time worrying about which college to apply to, that will just fall into place
- Be disheartened. It's a competitive environment but the only way to guarantee you won't be successful is to not try at all

Based on an original article by Helen Charlesworth, Head of Communications for Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach at the University of Oxford.