



UNIVERSITY OF  
**OXFORD**



# **OXFORD**

interviews

*your guide*



# your interviews guide

In deciding which candidates to interview, tutors identify who they feel shows the greatest academic ability and potential for success at Oxford. A number of tutors will give careful consideration to your UCAS application, and the results of any admissions test and submitted written work. Not everyone who applies will be shortlisted for interview, much like applying for a job.

Oxford uses tutorial teaching, which requires students to engage in discussion in small groups, including one-to-one discussion with a tutor. Assessing candidates through interviews, which closely mirror the format of a tutorial, is important in ensuring that we admit the students who will most benefit from this style of teaching. Our tutors are aware that this can be an intimidating process, and receive training to ensure they account for candidate nerves when evaluating performance.

Interviews are academic in nature, not a chit-chat about life in general. They will stretch a candidate, posing problems and questions that will require them to think. For many applicants, it is their first real opportunity to have a detailed and in-depth discussion about their subject.

The interview process also allows candidates a chance to experience student life at the University so they can find out if Oxford is for them.

I hope that you find this guide useful, and wish you every success with your application.

Mike Nicholson

Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach



## **WHY** does Oxford interview?

“Interviews tell us important things about a candidate which are not captured by grades or test scores. We can see candidates think, not merely parrot information.”

**Medicine tutor**

“Interviews give us the chance to see whether an applicant has the intellectual capacity to learn and be stretched by our teaching system; fundamentally the question is this: can we teach this person in a tutorial situation and will they thrive in this environment?”

**Italian tutor**

“I interview to find what we call ‘potential’ and disentangle it from either poor schooling or coaching.”

**Physics tutor**

## **WHEN** will I hear?

All interviews take place in December but please be aware that you may only be given a week's notice that you have been shortlisted. You will receive a letter or an email indicating whether or not you have been invited for interview towards the end of November or in early December. Normally this will be from the college to which you applied or to which you were allocated if you made an open application. Occasionally if a college is significantly oversubscribed for a subject, you may be invited by a different college.

A timetable for interviews is available generally from August, at [ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews).

*I had heard so many stories about the interviews; crazy questions, crazy tutors, expecting some crazily intelligent response - so I was very nervous. Upon arrival I started to relax a bit. My first interview went fine; as I was applying for Physics they asked me logical questions about physical things. Often I had no idea what they were talking about, so they would give some hints and then we would work it through. The key was an open mind, and a readiness to learn. I had no idea whether I had got in or not; I felt that I had done badly, but I had enjoyed it. I guess the key is; before interviews talk through problems - unrelated to your syllabus - with teachers, be calm and have an open mind - take a second to think, if you have no idea, say and they will help.*

*Will, Physics*



*Having Asperger Syndrome - an autistic spectrum condition - I thought I would find it really difficult to get talking to all these new people. As it turned out, I was welcomed by friendly current students and immediately started chatting to other people applying for my subject. The interviewers were incredibly sympathetic and understanding. They weren't looking to catch me out, but rather, to help me demonstrate my ability. It was apparent over those three days, that an Oxford education was welcoming, accessible, and about having fun as well as working hard. Having Asperger and arriving for interviews was terrifying, but well worth it, and it simply wasn't a huge issue.*

*Chris, PPE*



## Applicants with **DISABILITIES**

Oxford University welcomes applications from disabled students, makes reasonable adjustments to facilitate their access to courses, and provides support and assistance throughout the interview process.

Please provide details of any disabilities in your UCAS application. We also recommend that students with disabilities inform their Oxford college of any particular requirements well in advance of their interview, so that any appropriate arrangements can be made. Please refer to [ox.ac.uk/swd](http://ox.ac.uk/swd) for further information on sources of support available.



**Geography:** If I were to visit the area where you live, what would I be interested in?

[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)



## **WHO** will interview me?

You will be interviewed by academic tutors at the colleges. They teach and research at the University and decide who studies here. Normally you will be interviewed by two tutors, occasionally more. If you are applying for a joint course, with two or more subjects, you should expect to be interviewed by tutors representing each of the subjects. For some joint courses you may be interviewed separately for each subject area.

## **WHAT** happens?

You will be asked to come to Oxford for one or more days, depending on the course that you're applying for. You will be given a room in college, and your accommodation and all your meals will be provided free-of-charge.

Once you arrive you will find out when your interview(s) will take place. In some subjects you will automatically be interviewed at a second college. For other subjects, you may be offered the opportunity to have an interview at a second or even a third. This does not necessarily mean that you will not be offered a place at the first college or that this college is no longer considering your application. This system is in place so that you are given the best possible chance of gaining a place.

*The interviews were a great chance to give an intellectual account of yourself to some of the sharpest minds on the planet, which despite being an unnerving experience was ultimately very rewarding. When I wasn't in interviews I could hang out with other applicants as well as with current second years, who were all really amazing company. We were well looked after, constantly kept supplied with tea, coffee and biscuits, and second years organised outings to restaurants and ice-cream parlours. The experience was so enjoyable that I've since been using it as an argument to get people to apply - it's almost worth applying just for the chance to sample Oxford University for a few days.*

*Alex, Philosophy and Theology*







## SUPPORT while you are **HERE**



# Hello

My name is Isabella and I'm one of the student helpers you might meet if you are invited for interview.

There are student helpers in each Oxford college throughout the interview period. We're all current undergraduates studying at that college. We're easily identifiable and friendly. But most importantly, we're here to help and support the interview candidates.

We all remember how scary the prospect of interviewing at Oxford felt when we were applying. Student helpers are there as a reassuring presence to make the interviewing process as stress-free and un intimidating as possible. We help candidates find their way around and get to know the college they are staying in. Student helpers are also there to answer any questions or worries that might arise. I've not met a helper who doesn't enjoy talking about their interview experiences or their time in Oxford!

Good luck!

Isabella



## WHAT to WEAR

Wear whatever clothes you feel comfortable in. Most tutors will not dress formally, and you really don't have to either. You won't be judged on what you wear!

## WHAT to BRING

Your invitation letter will let you know what to bring but here are some general recommendations:

- Copies of your personal statement and any written work that you have submitted (tutors may refer to these during your interview)
- A mobile phone and charger (so that the college can contact you if they need to)
- A book or some current school work (only a relatively small amount of time is spent in interviews)

Interviews are a chance for you to see what life is like as an Oxford student:

- In many ways your interviews will be like a mini tutorial, the format of much of the teaching at Oxford
- Only a relatively small amount of your time in Oxford will actually be spent in interviews, so you will have plenty of opportunity to explore Oxford and to get to know the city
- If you are here for a number of days, you will live in college and have a chance to meet other students



**Engineering:** How would you design a gravity dam for holding back water?

[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)



## **WHAT** are **TUTORS** looking for?

“ First of all, there really is no Oxford ‘type’. A promising applicant is one who is flexible, responsive and thoughtful in their approach, whichever educational system or background they come from. ”

**Italian tutor**

“ Clarity of expression and thought, precision of analysis, flexibility of argument, and sheer enthusiasm for the subject...a raw intellectual curiosity which encourages the student to think and question. ”

**History tutor**

“ A deep, irresistible interest in the subject they want to study combined with an imaginative but rigorous mind. The best interviews develop into conversations rather than question-and-answer sessions. ”

**English tutor**

## **WHAT** will I be **ASKED**?

Tutors will understand that you may be nervous and will try to put you at your ease. They want you to feel able to be yourself in the interview, and to allow you to demonstrate your skills and abilities.

They will probably ask you a few simple questions to begin with, perhaps about something in your personal statement. They will then move on to questions about your subject.

Depending on what is relevant for the course you are applying for, you may be given a piece of text, a poem, a graph, or an object, and then asked to answer questions and comment on it. You may be given these before the interview, and will be advised if there is anything in particular on which you need to focus.

For courses that require you to submit written work tutors may refer to this.

The basis for some questions may include the subjects that you are currently studying at school or college. However, you will also be offered opportunities to show whether you have read around the subject and to demonstrate your interest beyond your school or college syllabus.

**?** **Modern Languages:**  
Should poetry be difficult to understand?  
[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)



## WHAT if I don't know the ANSWER?

“ For the most part, interviews are about seeing how well you can think something through, not how much you already know. So don't hesitate to ask for clarification if you are unfamiliar with a particular technical term, or if a question you've been asked seems unclear or ambiguous. ”

### Medicine tutor

If you don't know the answer to a question, don't worry! You may wish to explain that you haven't covered that topic yet, but do try to work out the answer if you can. Many questions are designed to test your ability to apply logic and reason to an idea you may never have encountered before.

## Are there RIGHT or WRONG answers?

“ We want to see someone thinking for themselves, being willing to tackle a challenging question... It's really important for candidates to understand that 'tackling' doesn't necessarily mean 'solving'; it'll be about applying skills that you already have to a new scenario, text, or problem, so we want to see how you set about it. ”

### French tutor

Sometime tutors may suggest an alternative way of looking at a problem. They are looking for evidence that you are willing to engage with new ideas, and that you can be flexible in your thinking.

*In my first interview, two tutors asked me questions about a couple of poems they'd given me. At one point I had absolutely no idea what to say, so they just moved on! I thought it was bad at the time, but I suppose it didn't matter. In my second interview I was invited to expand on some of the things from my personal statement. That evening we were shown where we could eat dinner in college, and after meeting a few people there we headed out to relax and compare our experiences of interviews.*

*Richard, English*







*My preparation was mostly to look over my personal statement and submitted essay which is just as well because they both came up in my first interview. Before my second interview I was given half an hour to read a source and have a think about it. In the interview the questions were broad and general allowing me to play with some different ideas. This interview felt a little tougher than the first one but I found myself really enjoying the challenge of the questions. I got the train home feeling generally happy and quite intellectually stretched.*

*Francesca, History*



## **WHAT IF** I make a **MISTAKE**?

“You said something that on reflection does not seem so clever after all? No big deal. “Oh – sorry – I take that back...” (big smile) “... perhaps this might be a better way to think about it...”

Exploring a blind alley or two is part of the normal thought process, and everyone makes occasional mistakes, but only very good candidates spot their own mistakes and recover from them.

**Medicine tutor**

## Are **EXTRA CURRICULAR** activities taken into account?

Tutors may ask you about extra curricular activities which you have mentioned in your personal statement, particularly to help you settle into the interview. However extra curricular activities will not be assessed unless they help to demonstrate how you meet the selection criteria for your course.

## **DO I HAVE** to ask a **QUESTION** at the **END**?

Please don't feel as though you must ask a question. If you are given the chance to ask your own questions at the end of the interview, this does not form any part of your assessment.

## **WHAT** about **COACHING**?

“It is much less likely that a candidate who has been coached will really listen to the questions they're being asked because they'll be focusing on what they've prepared.”

**English tutor**

“Most of the sort of thinking questions we are asking are very hard to rehearse for. It is therefore usually quite easy to distinguish a candidate's real ability to think on their feet and their enthusiasm for the subject from the veneer that comes from coaching.”

**Medicine tutor**

“I am looking for potential, not polish.”

**Physics tutor**



**Music:** If you could invent a new musical instrument, what kind of sound would it make?

[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)



## HOW can I PREPARE?

“ Have a clear reason in your mind as to why you have applied for this subject. ”  
**Engineering tutor**

“ Practise talking through your thinking process – whether that’s speaking aloud to yourself, or to a friend or teacher. ”  
**French tutor**

“ By far the best way to prepare for an interview is to do a few trial runs with a friend or teacher asking questions. This helps to demystify the situation. ”  
**Physics tutor**

“ There is no better practice for being interviewed than being interviewed. If you can’t get someone to interview you, mentally rehearse it in your head. ”  
**Medicine tutor**

“ Read as widely as you can in your chosen subject and then think carefully about what you read. Ask yourself questions: so rather than “I really like this book” it should be “Why do I really like this book?”, “How does it compare to something else I’ve read?”, “What connections can I see between this book and others”... ”  
**English tutor**



## We **RECOMMEND** that you:

- Remind yourself of the selection criteria for your chosen subject at [ox.ac.uk/criteria](https://www.ox.ac.uk/criteria).
- Re-read your personal statement and any written work submitted, and ensure that you are happy to discuss them.
- Read widely around your chosen subject, including newspaper articles, websites, journals, magazines and other relevant publications.
- Take a critical view of ideas and arguments that you encounter in your reading, at school or college, or in the media – think about all sides of the debate.
- Find examples of your subject in the wider world, such as taking an interest in the scientific or economic theories that underlie news stories.
- Revise material you have studied at school recently.



**History:** Imagine we had no records about the past at all, except everything to do with sport – how much of the past could we find out about?  
[ox.ac.uk/interviews](https://www.ox.ac.uk/interviews)





## INTERNATIONAL students

If you are currently studying in the UK, the rest of the EU, Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein or Switzerland, then you will be expected to attend interviews in Oxford in December if your application is shortlisted.

If you are currently studying in another country, we understand that it may not be possible for you to travel at short notice. In this case, your college may arrange to interview you by telephone or over the internet. (The one exception to this is for Medicine where all shortlisted applicants must attend interviews in Oxford.)

If you decide to book a flight before hearing whether or not you have been shortlisted, and are then unsuccessful, you might like to use this time to visit other higher education institutions in the UK. If you choose to wait to hear if you have been shortlisted, then you will need to factor in the cost of travel to Oxford at short notice.

Please note that the interview timetable is normally available from August, at [ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews).

Please see [ox.ac.uk/int](http://ox.ac.uk/int) for further details about international applications.

*My interviews were very much focused around maths and problem solving. They started with some warm up questions on my personal statement, and then a few questions on modern day engineering. It is definitely worth reading a few engineering magazines before your interview, so you are up to date with the engineering world. Then the maths began, for example, in one of the interviews, I was asked about how many watts a cycling machine might output. This meant using basic physics formulae and general knowledge to vaguely work out a sensible answer. I was asked increasingly hard questions on pendulums and questions to do with a toppling wall. In a weird way, I enjoyed my interviews; they were obviously a little stressful but looking back it was fun.*

*Dan, Engineering*



**Biological Sciences:**  
Why do many animals have stripes?  
[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)



## WHAT happens NEXT

You will receive a letter or an email by the middle of January letting you know the outcome of your application. If you are successful, this will tell you whether:

- You have been made an offer of a place, conditional upon achieving certain exam results. The offer may specify that you need to achieve certain grades in particular subjects. (It may also include a requirement for evidence of proficiency in the English language, if English is not your first language or if you have not been educated in the medium of English language during your two most recent years of study.)
- You have an unconditional offer based on your existing academic credentials.
- You have been made an 'open offer'. This means that you are guaranteed a place at Oxford if you meet the conditions of the offer. However the college you will go to has not yet been specified, and will not be decided until some point after your final exam results have been published.



## FEEDBACK

In January you can request feedback on your interviews (the deadline for requests is 30 April) from the college which originally invited you for interview. College contact details can be found at [ox.ac.uk/ugcolls](http://ox.ac.uk/ugcolls).

# Good Luck



## FINDING OUT MORE

### Admissions Information Centre

If you have any further questions you can call, email, write or visit.

[ox.ac.uk/aic](http://ox.ac.uk/aic)

### Contact details

Tel: +44 (0)1865 288 000

Email: [undergraduate.admissions@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:undergraduate.admissions@admin.ox.ac.uk)

[ox.ac.uk/study](http://ox.ac.uk/study)

### Mock interviews

View video clips of mock interviews with current students at [ox.ac.uk/intvids](http://ox.ac.uk/intvids)

### Sample questions

Find example questions from interviews and video clips of academic discussions with our tutors at

[ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews)

### Podcasts

Listen to Mike Nicholson, Oxford's Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Outreach, as he chats with students and staff from around the University about how best to prepare for the Oxford interview.

[ox.ac.uk/podcasts](http://ox.ac.uk/podcasts)

### iTunes U

Lectures, interviews, short films about life in Oxford, and our podcasts can all be found on iTunes U.

[itunes.ox.ac.uk](http://itunes.ox.ac.uk)



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