

UNDERGRADUATE ENTRANCE TO OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITIES

PRACTICE INTERVIEWS ORGANISED BY THE OXFORD & CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY SOCIETIES OF LUXEMBOURG

PREPARATION FOR YOUR INTERVIEWS

1. Introduction.

The purpose of this note is to help candidates prepare for their interviews, both the practice and the real one. We give below practical advice on what you can do. In order to understand this advice you need to understand the objectives and methods of both the real interviews and the practice interviews.

2. Objectives and methods of the real interviews.

Oxford & Cambridge use your school marks and the results of aptitude tests (if required for your course) to decide whether or not to call you to interview. The interview is therefore not primarily a test of knowledge. It is more a test of your potential to learn.

The way this is done is by confronting you with questions and problems that you have probably never faced before and seeing how you react. The content of the questions will be about subjects you have studied in school or outside, relevant to the course you have applied to study. Interviewers may present you beforehand with a text or a set of data to study. There may also be questions about things that you have written in your Personal Statement, especially books or articles you have read. This is not simple question-and-answer because often there is no simple answer. You have to show that you can analyse a problem even if you cannot arrive at an answer.

The interview is really a dialogue. You are expected to put forward your conclusions or views and then defend them under questioning. If you are not used to handling this kind of intellectual dialogue you may feel that you are being put under pressure or even criticised. You do not have to have an extrovert personality to deal with this sort of interview. You may be quiet or even shy, so long as you can present and defend your views. All the interviewers are looking for is academic ability – nothing else.

3. Objectives and methods of the practice interviews.

The objectives of a practice interview are to –

- A. help candidates to be aware of how interviews work as social interactions, in both their verbal and non-verbal aspects;
- B. provide practice for candidates in handling an interview with strangers in unfamiliar surroundings;
- C. provide practice for candidates in answering a wide variety of questions, including some specific to their proposed field of study (but please see points 4 (i) and (ii) below);
- D. help candidates be aware of strengths and weaknesses in their behaviour in an interview situation;
- E. help candidates, especially if their mother tongue is not English, to be aware of any specific failings of English language (e.g. lack of subject-specific terminology) that may prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities.

The interviewers in the practice will ask you subject-based questions, just as in the real interview. There is no formal assessment of candidates. Instead we offer an extended oral feedback. For more information about the practice interviews you should study the Terms & Conditions issued by the two Societies.

4. Overview of preparation

There are four classes of things that you can do to prepare yourself for your interviews:

1. Prepare key topics in your core subjects.
2. Prepare key topics from your Personal Statement.
3. Practice key techniques
4. Mentally prepare for other things that you cannot practice.

Item #1 of this work will be the same as that for your school examinations, except where you need to do this in English. Item #1 and some of the techniques in item #3 are also useful for aptitude tests. Overall, you need to approach this as another, rather different exam that you should prepare for.

Preparation takes time, so you need to start early. We know you are under a lot of pressure with your school work and other activities, so we suggest you start doing this in your summer vacation. You should have made your decision to apply to Oxford or Cambridge before the end of the summer term, so that you can prepare your UCAS application and ask your teachers for references.

5. Prepare key topics in your core subjects (all subjects)

“Core subjects” means the ones that Oxford or Cambridge has specified as being necessary to be accepted for your course. In each subject select key topics that you know well. Make sure you know the key facts and theories.

If you have not studied the subject in English write summary notes in English. Note any items you find difficult to express in English and then look them up in the dictionary or on-line (e.g. in Wikipedia) or get an English speaker who knows the subject to help you.

Make sure you know how each topic or area of knowledge fits together with others. Understanding connections between areas of knowledge is important.

Note down areas of research, uncertainty or dispute about these topics, if you have read about such things.

This is general advice applicable to all subjects.

6. Prepare key topics from your Personal Statement

Identify phrases in your Personal Statement that are related to your studies and that may be the basis of a question. Then prepare these the same way as for key topics in your core subjects.

7. Practice key techniques

Analysis of a text: identify main hypotheses or points of view, conflicting views or evidence, conclusions. Summarise these in your own words. Decide if you agree/disagree with any of these positions and if so why.

Analysis of data: if the data is not already in graphic form try to sketch (but only sketch, not plot) an appropriate graph. If it is already a graph, read the labels and text accompanying it, then identify axes, data units and types of scales (linear/logarithmic). Look at data offsets from origin, maxima, minima and inflection points – and try to work out what these represent. If there are different graphs on the same topic ask yourself if they provide adequate and/or comparable representations.

Vocalisation of analysis, which means talking aloud in English as you go through the steps of a problem. Work with a mirror and/or voice recorder.

“Cool” argument: start a discussion with a friend/parent/teacher on a topic that you both know about. It doesn't have to be your subject of study at university – try music, art, politics, religion. Find an opportunity to disagree with them and then defend your point of view. Keep the argument going so long as you can advance new ideas and evidence. Keep cool! You can try this in your mother tongue, then in English.

8. Mentally prepare for other things you cannot practice

You cannot easily practice these things but you can think about them beforehand.

Listen to the question. Listen for key phrases that tell you what subject area this is about – work out what would constitute an answer (even if you do not have one!). Do all this before you start to reply.

Answer the question, keep to the point and then stop. Do not distract the interviewers with other ideas or views.

Follow-up questions can present opportunities to mention related topics that you know well but they must be related to the previous question (don't wander!)

It may happen you simply do not understand the question. If you have not studied the topic at all, say so – the interviewers will move on. If it seems to be on a topic you know, either ask them to re-phrase it or better, play it back to them in your own words and ask for confirmation that you have understood it.

Manage your non-verbal behaviour. Sit straight and square to your interlocutor and look directly at them. Keep your hands down on the table or on your thighs unless you want to gesture to make a point. If you are feeling nervous, take slow, deep breaths and relax your shoulders, arms and legs.

9. Be prepared for something different!

The format and style of interviews may vary between subjects and between colleges. In general interviewers try to be supportive and helpful to candidates, but this may not always be true. Some interviewers may use a lot of questions with few follow-up questions and discussion. Others may prefer to build a dialogue with you and let you be more discursive. Some may ask questions about you and your Personal Statement, others may completely ignore personal questions. The best advice is: do not allow yourself to become upset if the format and style of the interview are not what you expected. Focus on your academic subjects and show them what you know and what you can do.

It's important also not to be worried by the apparent confidence of other candidates and not to listen to rumours amongst the candidates about the interviews. They are in no better position than you are – it's an open competition.