Making a competitive application for an Oxbridge course

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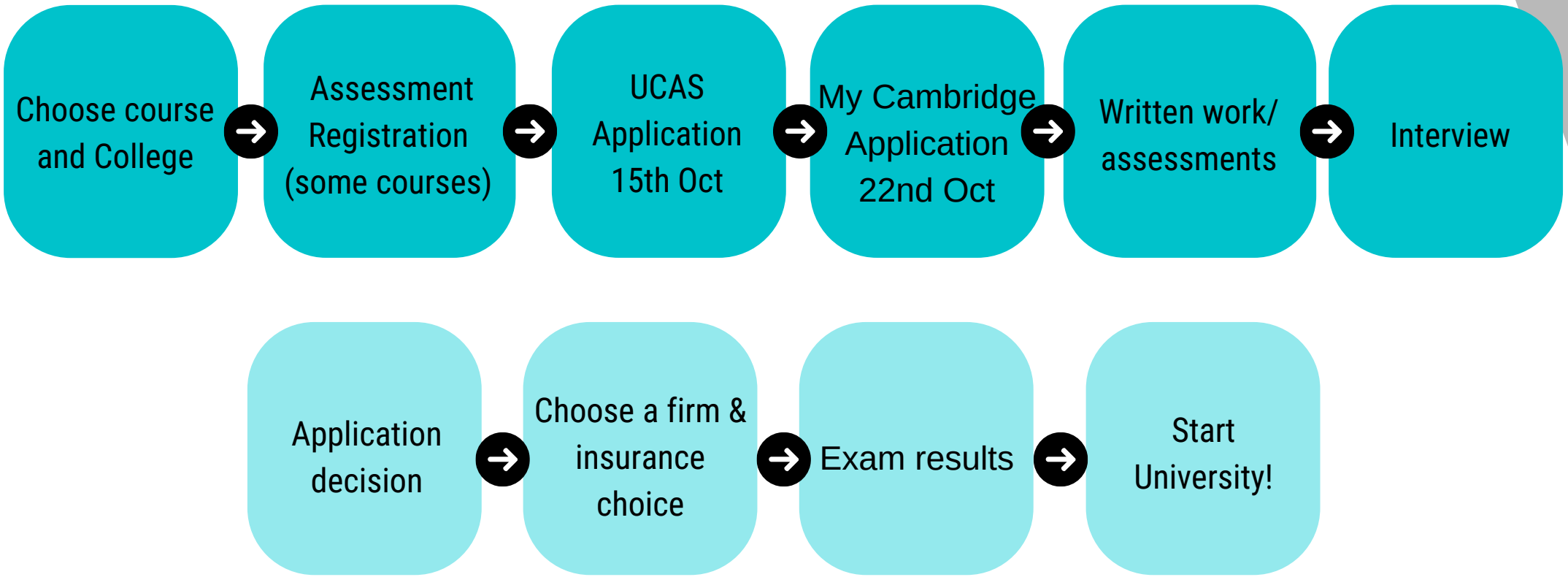
So what are the hurdles that prevent able students accessing competitive courses at Oxford and Cambridge?

- Students **don't apply**.
- Doing the right combination of A levels e.g. importance of further maths for engineering and computing is not to be underestimated.
- **Personal statements** should give evidence of super curricular work.
- Students are not sufficiently prepared for **admissions tests** – often this is a problem of fluency and lack of practice which means papers are not completed.
- Students do not always perform well at interview.

How to choose a university course?

- Choosing the right course is the single most important aspect of a university application and it's never too soon to start looking and thinking about this.
- Students should follow their interests and enthusiasms.
- Activities that will helps students make better informed choices about the university courses they want to study include:
  - Online research about the course
  - Visiting the universities virtually or in person
  - Talking to academics and students.
  - Super curricular work

APPLICATION PROCESS



Cambridge and Oxford are Collegiate Universities

Which means there is a three tier system:

- *Colleges* = places to live, study and eat. We have 29 undergraduate colleges (including Gonville & Caius)
- *Departments* = for specific courses, e.g. History
- *The University of Cambridge* = includes everyone, all colleges and all subjects

- You become a member of the University, a college, and a department



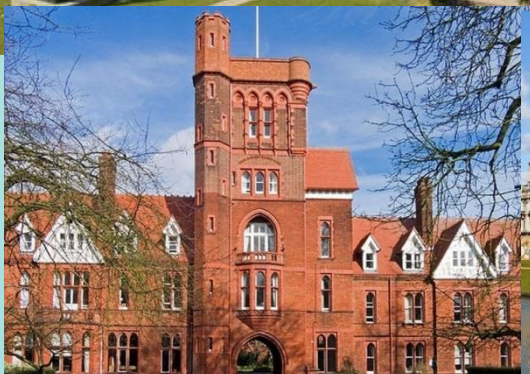














PICKING A COLLEGE

Does it offer my course?

Geography

Brasenose College, Christ Church, Hertford College, Jesus College, Keble College, Mansfield College, Regent's Park College, St Anne's College, St Catherine's College, St Edmund Hall, St Hilda's College, St John's College, St Peter's College, Worcester College

Size, age, location, gender

Facilities, Accommodation and Financial Support

What are we looking for?

- Academic ability and aptitude for chosen subject
- Satisfy any subject requirements – ranging from AAA-A*A*A at A-Level
- Genuine subject interest – motivation and enthusiasm
- Self-discipline, self-motivation and commitment
- Ability to think for oneself, to be open to new ideas and intellectual challenges
- Good ‘fit’ between applicant and course – including whether you would benefit from the Oxbridge learning environment and how your course is assessed.
- Vocational commitment (where appropriate)

What information do we use to assess applications?

- We consider every application individually, taking all aspects into account:

- Academic record
- Personal statement
- Teacher's reference
- Performance in any admission test / assessment (where required)
- Written work (where required)
- Contextual data
- Interview

- **No part of an application is considered in isolation and no one part of the process is more important than any other.**

What can you do now to support a successful university application?

What are Super-curricular activities?

- Activities you do in your spare time that are also academically relevant, that **extend and deepen knowledge** of your subject.
- Should focus on the **subject/s you would like to study at university**, and any areas of particular interest within this.
  - Help you develop key subject specific skills and knowledge.
  - Show the ability to study independently and manage your time well.
  - Evidence to Admissions Tutors that you are passionate about your subject and motivated to study it.
- **If you're not quite sure yet, super-curriculars are a great way to discover which subject you really want to study!**

Reading

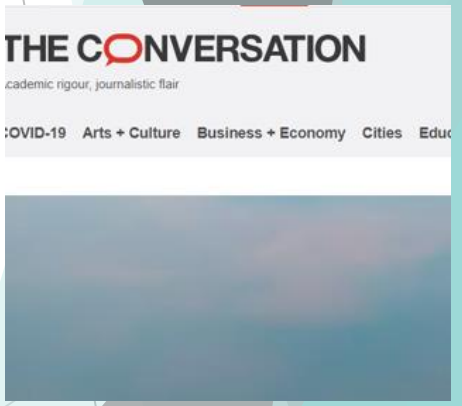
https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/increasing-access/ug-digital-resources/students-over-16

Use Google Scholar and / or JSTOR to find recent publications:
https://scholar.google.com/
https://www.jstor.org/

Many societies have a magazine which is free/part of the membership

Go to your library and read magazines such as *The Economist* and *New Scientist*

Read foreign language newspapers



Talks and lectures

- Royal Astronomical Society Lectures: https://ras.ac.uk/events-and-meetings/Public-Lectures-and-Events
- Many societies arrange speakers to come and talk to the public (e.g. the British Psychological Society has ‘psychology in the pub’ all around the country)
- Royal Institution Christmas Lectures: https://www.rigb.org/christmas-lectures
- Gresham Lectures on a range of subjects: https://www.gresham.ac.uk/attend/
- Many universities will have free online lectures:
  - https://www.theglobalclassroom.com/great-hall-lecture-series/
  - https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/events/public-lectures-events
- MOOCs – Massive Online Open Courses: https://www.mooc.org/
- https://www.youtube.com/@CaiusSchools/videos
- Documentaries on television, BBC iPlayer, etc.

Competitions and challenges

- Essay competition for arts and humanities: https://newn.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduates/newnham-essay-prizes/
- Design competitions for engineering: https://www.dyson.com/newsroom/overview/update/top-five-engineering-challenges-to-do-at-home
- National science and engineering competition: https://www.thebigbang.org.uk/the-big-bang-competition/.
- CodinGame for programming skills: https://www.codingame.com/start
- Caius Explore https://www.cai.cam.ac.uk/access-outreach/resources-and-events/caius-explore

Podcasts and YouTube channels

- All subjects: Crash Course, Tom Scott, TED Talks Daily, In Our Time
- ASNC: History with Hilbert
- Archaeology: Rachelamun
- Architecture: Architect Russell (especially his shorts/Tik Toks), ArchitectureTalk
- Classics: Natalie Haynes Stands Up for the Classics
- Computer Science: Reducible, Computerphile
- Economics: EconplusDal, The Economist Podcasts
- Education: Mind the Gap: Making Education Work Across the Globe
- Engineering and Chemical Engineering: ElectroBOOM, Real Engineering
- English: adamkhanco, audiobooks and analysis on Spotify (e.g. Austen's Persuasion), The Penguin Podcast, The History of Literature
- Geography: Geodiode, More or Less: Behind the Stats
- History: The Rest is History, Dan Snow's History Hit and spinoffs (Not Just the Tudors, Gone Medieval, The Ancients, American History Hit, Betwixt the Sheets)
- Politics: The Rest is Politics, Talking Politics
- History of Art: Great Art Explained, The Great Women Artists
- HSPS: Code Switch, Sociology Ruins Everything
- Law: Law in Action, Law Pod UK
- Linguistics: NativLang
- Maths: Numberphile, 3Blue1Brown
- Medicine: LadySpineDoc, JakeGoodmanMD (especially his series of "You're the Doctor" shorts), Sawbones, RCP Medicine Podcast
- Languages: Langfocus, any creators in your target language, Duolingo Podcasts
- Music: Listening In
- General STEM: Veritasium, Kurzgesagt, SciShow, Ask the Naked Scientists, Sabine Hossenfelder
- Biology/Life Sciences: PBS Eons, Big Biology
- Physics: Sixty Symbols, minutephysics, Steve Mould
- Chemistry: Chemistry in its Element, Chemistry For Your Life
- Philosophy: Philosophize This!, Philosophy Tube
- Psychology: Speaking of Psychology
- Theology: Religion for Breakfast
- Veterinary Medicine: Vet Times Podcast

Useful websites for maths, computer science, engineering and physics

https://www.ukmt.org.uk/challenges

https://www.cipherchallenge.org/

https://www.ukmt.org.uk/enrichment/mentoring-scheme

https://bmos.ukmt.org.uk/home/bmo.shtml

https://madasmaths.com/

https://maths.org/step/welcome

https://integralmaths.org/ritangle

https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/admissions/python-challenges-page

https://projecteuler.net

https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/outreach/oxford-mathematics-alphabet

https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/outreach/oxford-online-maths-club

https://causeway.education/wider-reading/2020y/3m/18d/stem-science-technology-engineering-mathematics

http://www.cs.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/why_oxford/background_reading.html

https://nrich.maths.org/post-16

https://www.bpho.org.uk/

https://isaacphysics.org/

https://i-want-to-study-engineering.org/

https://brilliant.org/

https://www.iop.org/explore-physics

https://www.arborsci.com/pages/next-time-questions

Work Experience for health and medicine courses

- Some health courses (medicine, allied health professions, veterinary science) require work experience
- You should look at the requirements of the particular course or courses that you are applying for – keep in mind that clinical work experience is not generally a requirement for applying to medical school in any year
- https://www.medschools.ac.uk/studying-medicine/making-an-application/work-experience
- https://www.rcgp.org.uk/observegp?gclid=Cj0KCQiAosmPBhCPARIsAHOen-N7iZObtGnl32zbjdLGqonvRMzPxQ56FMxF2BBt5koWqR2O_bMpHzYaAtLMEALw_wcB
- https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/studying-medicine/becoming-a-doctor/getting-medical-work-experience

Getting the most from super-curricular activities

- Extra reading and exploration are very useful across all subjects.
- Critical engagement
  - What is the argument in this book/article/lecture?
  - What is the supporting evidence?
  - What is the problem that you are solving?

  Why is it important?
  - What do I think about it ? How can I find out more?
  - Talk to friends and family about what you have read/done

- Students should keep a log of what they have done and more importantly, **what they learned** from the experience

Personal statements for competitive university courses

Extracurricular Activities.	outside of the core school curriculum e.g. sports, student government, volunteering, playing an instrument
Super Curricular activities	Activities that relate to the subjects you are learning in school, but go beyond what is taught in the curriculum and the classroom e.g. more depth or breadth

What are universities looking for in a personal statement?

- People with the skills and attributes tailored to the course.
- People ready for university style learning.
- People who genuinely enjoy the subject that they are applying for.
- Your **personal statement** should demonstrate these

Skills for Computing and maths example

Tutors will, in addition to assessing **aptitude** and **technical skills**, seek in successful candidates

1. the capacity to absorb and use new ideas,
2. the ability to think and work independently, and
3. perseverance and enthusiasm,

Changes to the personal statement for 2026 university entry

- The personal statement is changing for students applying to start university in the autumn of 2026.
- It has changing from 4000 characters of continuous prose to responses to 3 questions. Each questions has a minimum response length of 350 characters. The total length of the statement remains 4000 characters.
- The most academic university courses remain very interested in the ways in which students have explored their subject interests beyond the curriculum. THIS HAS NOT CHANGED.

https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/writing-your-personal-statement/new-personal-statement-2026-entry

Question 1: Why do you want to study this course or subject?

- Motivation for studying the course
- Knowledge of this subject area and your interests
- Future plans and why the course is a good fit for you

- **How might students make links to their super-curricular activities in their answer to this question?**

Question 2: How have your qualifications and studies helped you to prepare for this course or subject?

- Remember that students could mention essays or projects they have written; their EPQ; competitions such as Caius Explore or UKMT…

- **How might students make links to their <u>super-curricular</u> activities in their answer to this question?**

Question 3: What else have you done to prepare outside of education, and why are these experiences useful?

Things to include in this section that highly competitive universities are interested in:

- Super-curriculars
- Work experience (if relevant to your course)
- Online learning activities e.g. Springpod, MOOCs etc.
- Trips and visits (online or in person) e.g. Museums, exhibitions, galleries, sites of historic interest, relevant sites connected to your course e.g. magistrate courts for law etc.
- Podcasts, TED talks, documentaries etc.

- *Highly competitive universities are not interested in discussion of extra-curricular activities here (keep it to 10% of the personal statement max)*

What do I write in each section?

The different sections can be confusing. What matters is that students write about their super curricular learning not so much where they put it……

“Students may feel an example could fit into more than one section — there's no right or wrong section to include something in, the important thing is to explain why they're including it and what they've learned from it”

https://www.ucas.com/advisers/help-and-training/guides-resources-and-training/pre-application-support/personal-statements-2026-entry-onwards

My Cambridge Application – additional personal statement

- 1200 characters of continuous prose offering any additional information or evidence that the student thinks is relevant for the course that they are applying for at Cambridge.
- Should be completed for Natural Sciences and Land Economy as these are subjects that are only offered at Cambridge. We want to know why you want to study Natural Sciences rather than chemistry for example.
- Optional for all other subjects – 50% of applicants leave this blank.

https://www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/sites/www.undergraduate.study.cam.ac.uk/files/publications/my-cambridge-application-home-students.pdf

Integrating super curriculars into your personal statement.

To find out more about the complexity of the brain, I read "So you want to be a brain surgeon" by Stephan Sanders. This has given me a great deal of insight into neurosurgery.

Admissions Tutor Comment:
"While this illustrates that the candidate is reading around the subject, some further significance [should] be given.

What looks really impressive is..

…taking your super curricular activity and saying what it made you think...

(Demonstrates critical thinking)

….or linking it to other things your have done or learned about.

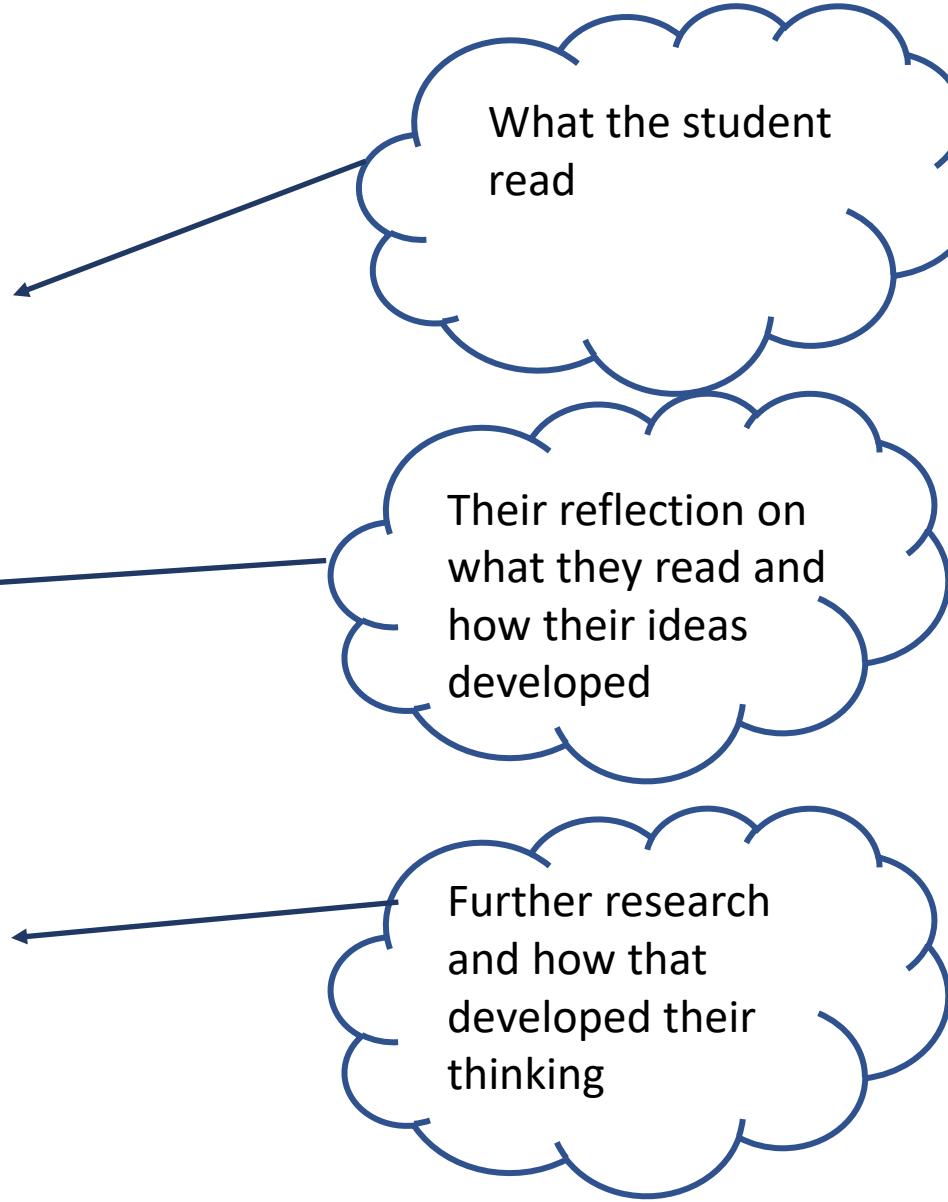
(Uses it as a stepping Stone)

Personal Statement for Maths

During the past year I have read several books about maths: my favourite of which was "Finding Moonshine" by Marcus du Sautoy.

Before reading the book, I had only considered symmetries as a property of shapes which appear the same on both sides of a line, but through reading this book I discovered that symmetries are wider reaching than I had expected. These symmetries can even be used to prove things including the inexistence of a formula to solve quintic equations: despite their seeming irrelevance to algebra and polynomials.

Reading this book was conveniently timed with further research on Group Theory; this allowed me to understand what du Sautoy described in the later parts of the book, especially the chapter which dramatized the race to find new sporadic groups in the 20th century.



Example

Medicine:

Put these countries in order by their crude mortality (deaths per thousands of the population):

Japan
Bangladesh
UK
South Africa

Q&A Time

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Caius Schools

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