



# YOUR GUIDE TO OXFORD INTERVIEWS





HISTORY

Is violence always political?  
Does 'political' mean something different in different contexts?

The **sample questions** throughout this guide, such as the ones shown on this page, are starting points for a conversation. The point is not to have an answer right away, but to be able to think about and discuss an interesting question or problem. You can read more about what the tutors are looking for when they ask these questions, and find more sample interview questions, at [ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews).



BIOLOGY

Is it easier for organisms to live in the sea or on land?



MUSIC

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



PHYSICS

A ball, initially at rest, is pushed upwards by a constant force for a certain amount of time. Sketch the velocity of the ball as a function of time, from start to when it hits the ground.



PSYCHOLOGY

A large study appears to show that older siblings consistently score higher than younger siblings on IQ tests. Why would this be?

## WHY DOES OXFORD INTERVIEW?

A good deal of the teaching at Oxford takes place in small classes or tutorials, and your interviewers – who may be your future tutors – are assessing your ability to study, think and learn in this way.

The interview is designed to assess your academic abilities and, most importantly,

your academic potential. Tutors are looking for your self-motivation and enthusiasm for your subject. Decisions are not based on your appearance or background, but on your ability to think independently and to engage with new ideas beyond the scope of your school or college syllabus.



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



If you have been called to interview that already means your application has impressed someone and that the interviewers think you have potential – they wouldn't be interviewing you if you didn't have a chance. So don't doubt at all that you have proven yourself academically.

ALESSANDRA, GEOGRAPHY STUDENT

## HOW CAN I BEST PREPARE FOR AN INTERVIEW?

It's natural to want to prepare before your interview, but the most important thing is to be yourself. The tutors will be trying to find out what you think, and how you think, and these things are easier to discover if you're able to relax a bit and listen carefully to the questions.

Practise speaking about your subject and your thoughts about what you've seen or read – these don't have to be formal 'mock interviews', instead they could be chats with teachers, friends, or members of your family. It is helpful to think of the interview as a conversation about your subject.

Here are some more specific things that you can do to prepare:

- 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 make sure 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.

### WHAT ABOUT COACHING?



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

### INTERVIEW PREPARATION WORKSHOPS

Oxford offers interview workshops in schools, with particular priority for those schools with lower numbers of successful applicants to Oxford. These workshops are usually provided by Oxford's colleges.

Every school and college in the UK has an allocated first link within the University, who you are welcome to contact to arrange an interview workshop: find yours at [ox.ac.uk/linkcolls](https://www.ox.ac.uk/linkcolls).

You can also watch a recorded webinar on interviews at [oxfordandcambridgeoutreach.co.uk](https://www.oxfordandcambridgeoutreach.co.uk) and a video about Oxford interviews at [ox.ac.uk/interviews](https://www.ox.ac.uk/interviews).



MEDICINE

Why do we have red blood cells?

## HOW CAN I BEST PREPARE FOR AN INTERVIEW?



Candidates are mainly judged on how well they are able to think about a problem, and less so on how much they know. So instead of desperately trying to memorize entire textbooks, read about biology-related topics you find interesting, think about what people have found, what they have not yet found and how outstanding questions could be addressed.

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES TUTOR



I broke down my personal statement and written work into small chunks and then wrote down all the questions I thought I might be asked. I also went over my notes from my current History course at the time. Both were useful exercises although I was in no ways able to pre-empt the questions I was asked!

GEORGINA, HISTORY STUDENT



The way to get better at solving hard maths problems is to practise, so take every opportunity to think about challenging questions that you find interesting. It's also worth thinking about how you'd explain your thinking to another person – you could even practise talking through a few questions to someone else (teacher, friend, pet, ...).

MATHEMATICS TUTOR



It is definitely worth finding someone to practise with and finding some example interview questions. Attempting a question in front of other people shows you that the pressure of working in front of tutors is manageable.

RACHEL, MATHEMATICS AND PHILOSOPHY STUDENT



Read around the subject and spend time trying to understand why things happen, rather than just learning that they do. Quality, not quantity is most important – if you don't understand something – re-read it and spend time thinking about it. Talk it through with your family or friends.

CHEMISTRY TUTOR



I'd suggest just getting a friend or relative to sit down in an interview setting and ask you difficult questions or moral dilemmas – not necessarily about your subject – just about current affairs...It's important to know what it feels like when your mind is 'blank'...It helped me to develop strategies to work through questions I originally didn't know the answers to.

ELLIE, MEDICINE STUDENT

## WHAT HAPPENS DURING A TYPICAL INTERVIEW?

### WHO WILL INTERVIEW ME?

You will be interviewed by academic tutors, usually within a college. 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.



Remember that the interviewers are trying to be kind and fair, and almost certainly went through the same themselves in the past.

COMPUTER SCIENCE TUTOR



You may encounter a range of interviewers from the very friendly to the more reserved. Don't be put off by anyone's manner - it won't have anything to do with you or how well you are doing in the interview.

HISTORY TUTOR

### ARE THERE RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS?

The questions may seem difficult, but many of the topics you will cover do not have simple 'right' or 'wrong' answers. Interviewers are not trying to make you feel ignorant or catch you out, but to stretch you in order to assess your potential.

Sometimes 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.



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

### WHAT IF I DON'T KNOW THE ANSWER?

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 always have a go and think through an 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.



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



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

### DO I HAVE TO ASK A QUESTION AT THE END?

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, so please don't feel as though you must ask something.

## WHAT HAPPENS DURING A TYPICAL INTERVIEW?



We discuss a poem or short literary extract that you haven't seen before, to see how you work through it and what you notice about it. We talk about your wider reading as you've indicated on your personal statement, and about how you think about the texts you've read.

ENGLISH TUTOR



The students typically get asked a mixture of conceptual and analytic problems. For the conceptual problems, the applicant will be given a scenario and be asked to describe the underlying science of it. For the analytic questions, the applicant is given a problem, and they have to develop a model and solve some equations.

ENGINEERING TUTOR



I had four interviews, two at the college I applied to and two at a different college. I had a Computer Science and a Philosophy interview at each college.... It was fine to go slowly and think over things. Even though I made a basic slip-up about maths, I was able to recover by going over it with my interviewer to show that I understood.

JENNY, COMPUTER SCIENCE AND PHILOSOPHY STUDENT



One question could be about a topic they mentioned in their personal statement. The candidate could be given an object (eg a bone, a leaf, etc). No one is expected to know what it is straight away, but what the interviewers are interested in, is seeing how the candidate thinks about how to try and find out what it is.

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES TUTOR



The tutors were lovely during the actual interviews; they're not trying to put pressure on candidates but gauge interest and capabilities in the subject. Which means I had some very interesting discussions, tailored to what I'd expressed interest in.

AMRITA, PPE STUDENT



I had two interviews which began with looking at an extract, and, both times, the first reading of it filled me with panic and I felt like I had no idea what they meant and nothing remotely intelligent to say about them: but I took some deep breaths, read them again slowly, and thought about them bit by bit, and managed to understand them and think of things I was happy to say.

EMILY, CLASSICS AND ENGLISH STUDENT

## WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE BEST CANDIDATES AT INTERVIEW?



An enthusiasm and drive for the subject. Not only wanting to know more, but to tear it apart, and see how it works. Why does this particular compound do this, but another similar compound does something different.

CHEMISTRY TUTOR



They rarely try to solve the whole problem in one go - instead, they divide it up into smaller, doable pieces, and then follow the logic of their answers to the full answer. They are not afraid to explore different paths to the solution, and they are often good at communicating why exactly they are doing what they are doing.

ECONOMICS TUTOR



The ability to think on their feet and to be analytical. They are not thrown when they get things wrong and keep trying.

MEDICINE/BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES TUTOR



Interest in the questions the interviewers put, willingness to rethink or look at answers from another angle. Flexibility, but also attentiveness to what is actually in the text. Being able to talk in detail about books.

ENGLISH TUTOR



One who is willing to think creatively, to engage with questions they might not have thought about before, to risk not giving the "right" answer (as there really isn't one!), and who can articulate clearly why they want to spend three years or more studying this subject. We know that this subject is "interesting": but why does it capture you and what drives your interest in it.

THEOLOGY AND RELIGION TUTOR



A willingness to be flexible and to respond to new information. Some candidates think they have to defend the view that they originally expressed to the death - this doesn't usually go well.

HISTORY TUTOR

## PRACTICALITIES

### WHEN WILL I HEAR ABOUT THE INTERVIEW?

All interviews take place in early to mid-December, so make sure you are going to be available during this time. Please be aware that you may only be given a week's notice that you have been shortlisted, and that interviews cannot be rearranged.

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 normally available from August, at [ox.ac.uk/interviews](http://ox.ac.uk/interviews).

### WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN I ARRIVE?

You will be asked to come to Oxford for one day or more, depending on the course that you're applying for. You will be given a room in college if you need to stay overnight, and your accommodation and all your meals will be provided for free.

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 of additional interviews is to give you the best possible chance of gaining a place.

Although most students will have returned home for the holiday, each college makes sure that there are plenty of undergraduates around to help and advise you. If you are staying for a few days, the college may also arrange social events.

### WHAT TO BRING

Your invitation letter will let you know what to bring. It is useful to have:

- Copies of your personal statement and any written work that you have submitted (tutors may refer to these during your interview)
- A book or some current school work (only a relatively small amount of time is spent in interviews)

### 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.



When I came to Oxford for my interviews, I can remember wishing that my four hour train journey could be just a bit longer so I could somehow re-read all the books I'd mentioned on my personal statement! I was incredibly nervous, but when I got to the college that was hosting me I was met by a really friendly second-year student, who showed me my room, where I could get food, and where all the information about interviews would be posted. He even carried my bag up four flights of stairs! He told me the best thing to do was to try and enjoy the whole process, and although it's easier said than done, it really is true.

Four years after my own interviews, I'm really looking forward to helping out this year and making sure everyone knows where they're going. Everyone helping will have been in your shoes not too long ago, and we understand how daunting it can seem. The colleges and tutors are all looking forward to meeting you, and I hope you have a great time at your interviews.

ISOBEL, MODERN LANGUAGES STUDENT AND INTERVIEW HELPER

## PRACTICALITIES

### 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.



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's and arriving for interviews was terrifying, but well worth it, and it simply wasn't a huge issue.

CHRIS, PPE STUDENT

### INTERNATIONAL APPLICANTS

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 over the internet or by telephone. (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.

A timetable for interviews 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 information for international applicants.

## AFTER YOUR INTERVIEW

### 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 records.
- 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 application (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).



Try and enjoy this experience as much as you can... spend the rest of your time exploring Oxford!

AMINA, CHEMISTRY STUDENT



ECONOMICS

Why is income per head between 50 and 100 times larger in the United States than in countries such as Burundi and Malawi?



THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Is someone who risks their own life (and those of others) in extreme sports or endurance activities, a hero or a fool?



MODERN LANGUAGES

In a world where English is a global language, why learn French?



BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES

Why do a cat's eyes appear to 'glow' in the dark?



PHYSICS

How hot does the air have to be in a hot air balloon if I wanted to use it to lift an elephant?



[OX.AC.UK/STUDY](http://OX.AC.UK/STUDY)

**OX?LORE** [www.explore.org](http://www.explore.org)

**You Tube** [www.youtube.com/Oxford](http://www.youtube.com/Oxford)

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