

Advice to Freshers on Studying at Oxford

Corpus Christi College, Oxford Michaelmas 2018

1. Tutors and Students

One of the most distinctive features of work at Oxford is the tutorial system. In addition to attending lectures (as in any other university), all undergraduates have one or more tutorials weekly during Full Term, in which they meet a tutor in a small group (of perhaps two or three students per tutor, sometimes in larger classes, occasionally individually) and present work which is discussed with the tutor. Tutorials and lectures are dealt with in more detail below (sections 5 and 7). This section explains what the role of the tutor is and what you may expect from him or her.

Whatever your subject, there will be one or more tutors, usually Fellows (permanent teaching members) of the College (and referred to from now on as College Tutors). Your College Tutor(s) are responsible for organising your teaching term by term and monitoring your progress. They will keep in regular touch with everyone else who is teaching you (both inside the College and in the wider University) and will receive written reports on your work at the end of every term. They are also there to help if you have problems with your academic studies, and can give guidance on study skills or arrange additional teaching if needed. **If you are having significant problems with your studies, it is important to talk to your College Tutor(s) about them earlier rather than later (because problems usually grow with time and become more difficult to solve).**

In addition to responsibility for directing your studies, College Tutors have a general responsibility for the welfare of their undergraduates in such areas as money, health, personal relations or anything else which may affect their life and work in the College. (Some colleges separate this 'pastoral' function from the academic, appointing for each undergraduate a 'moral tutor' separate from their subject tutor; in Corpus College Tutors exercise both functions.) Your College Tutor(s) will not seek to pry into your private life, but will regard it as part of their job to be available to help you in any area in which you seek help or advice. It is very important that you should feel free to go to your College Tutor(s) with any problem, without feeling that you are wasting their time or overstepping the bounds of the tutorial relationship. If your College Tutor(s) do feel able to offer any help, they will gladly do so. If more specialised (e.g. medical) help appears to be needed, your College Tutor will suggest whom you should consult, and may be able to help to arrange an appointment. (See also section 9.)

While College Tutors will always seek to preserve confidentiality, it may be necessary for them, in discharging their responsibility to individual students and to the college, to consult other appropriate persons, such as the Dean of Welfare, who specialises in pastoral work. Since the Senior Tutor is responsible for the co-ordination of the academic administration of the College, including matters relating to students, College Tutors are expected to notify the Senior Tutor of problems likely to affect students' academic performance. In those circumstances disclosure of personal information will be kept to a minimum.

One of the advantages of the college system is that students see a lot of each other and have the opportunity to help and advise one another. Your tutorial partners are often the best people with whom to discuss topics that are giving you difficulty prior to a tutorial and those that arise during a tutorial. More experienced students may also offer advice, or even notes and essays. Their advice will often be helpful, but their work won't be. Quite apart from the fact that College Rules strictly forbid you from copying other people's work (which is plagiarism, and will be treated as such), this will simply prevent you from developing your own potential. One of the most important skills that you learn at university is how to solve complex problems yourself.

2. Working on your Own - Planning your Time

Since there is no rigid timetable for study in Oxford and for large periods of time you have to work on your own without guidance, you must get used to planning your time effectively. This may well be the most crucial skill that you need to acquire in your time at Oxford. If you sleep for 8 hours a day, that leaves 112 hours per week for your academic work, meals, social life, clubs, sports, music, laundry, shopping and the rest. Certain rare people don't need to make timetables and plans, but most people do. Also try to plan your time so that when you do work, you work efficiently. What is important is how well you achieve your objective, not how long you spend doing it. So think about how you can arrange your time to maximise efficiency. A few points to bear in mind are:

- (a) Completing your work to the best of your ability must always be your top priority. Of course you will want to do other things as well, and the College accepts and welcomes that, but you must fit other activities around your academic commitments, and not the other way about.
- (b) There will be fixed points around which you need to organise your work, such as lectures, tutorials, classes and (for science students) practicals, as well as deadlines to meet. There is no point in allowing yourself the three days immediately before a deadline to do a piece of work if those three days are already filled with other fixed commitments.
- (c) More problems arise from underestimating how long you need to spend on a piece of work than from any other reason, so allow yourself some flexibility when planning your work. Different people need different amounts of time to do the same work, so don't just do what everyone else seems to be doing.
- (d) Try to work evenly throughout the week. If all your deadlines are towards the end of the week, it is very tempting to take time off at the beginning of the week when the deadlines appear far away. This only results in work overload later on.
- (e) Different people work best at different times of the day or night. There is no need to follow a 9 am to 5 pm, Monday to Friday regime. Some people like to work at weekends because it is quieter and there are no interruptions from lectures or tutorials. Other people find they work most efficiently in the evenings. However, in order to do a specific piece of work you may need access to other resources available only at particular times, such as University or Department libraries, and so you have to plan your work around their availability as well. Equally, if you work all night, you are unlikely to cope well with lectures, tutorials and lab sessions that are timetabled during the day.
- (f) Work at a pace that suits you. Some people need to work in large blocks of time without distractions, other people work best in short bursts with frequent coffee breaks. However, no one works well when they are too tired, so make sure you get the rest you need.
- (g) Some topics/problems need two or three attempts before you understand them: this will be a common experience in Oxford. If you are finding a particular topic very difficult, it may be worth putting it on one side, doing a different piece of work and coming back to it again the next day (assuming that you have built in enough flexibility in your work plan - see above).
- (h) In general, you will probably work better in some places than in others (your room, the College Library, university libraries, or wherever). However, for any given piece of work the optimum location may be determined by the resources that you need for it. In some cases you may work most efficiently by borrowing or buying specific standard texts and working in your room. In other cases you may need frequent access to a much larger range of journals or reference texts (or not know which texts you will need) so that working in the central Bodleian or Radcliffe Science Library will be more efficient. Producing a poor piece of work because "I work best in the College Library but the books I needed weren't there" is not an acceptable excuse. Oxford has some of the best academic libraries in the world - do use them to the full!

- (i) Both on the academic and non-academic side, you're likely to find yourself very pressed for time in Oxford during term. You will need to remove some of this pressure by making good academic use of the vacations, which are an integral part of the academic year. In most subjects the vacation is the time for reading essential texts and background material for the following term's tutorials; in all subjects it is a time for reviewing and consolidating the previous term's work (writing up lecture and tutorial notes, identifying areas that you still do not understand fully so that they can be addressed early in the next term, etc.). It is most important not to neglect this work: it will make a very significant difference both to your termly work and to your preparation for exams. Your tutor may also set you specific vacation work. If you leave this until you get back to Oxford at the beginning of the next term, then you will just create more problems for yourself. You need to plan your vacation work before you leave Oxford to make sure that you have available all the information and resources you need (for example borrowing the books that you will require from Oxford libraries or arranging the use of a university library close to where you will be staying during the vacation).

If you do have problems organising your time, then ask your College Tutor for guidance (this is one of the things that they are there for), preferably before the problem becomes too large. Failure to hand in work is taken very seriously, and it is far better if your tutor hears from you that you are having problems before your deadline is reached than after it. Keeping a detailed note of how much time you actually spend working each day may help (and you may be surprised by the answer).

It is important to realise that you will have to work hard in Oxford: you will spend many more hours working by yourself that you did at school, and tasks that may have taken you a relatively short time at school (a problem sheet, a homework essay) will generally take longer here, because they are more difficult, and because you are required to read so much more. Even so, if you are finding the workload unmanageable, it is imperative that you talk to your College Tutor(s) about it: they will not think badly of you and it is likely that there are simple changes that you can make to your working patterns in order to make life easier. Occasionally students may find that they have too many different obligations in a single term: it is always worth talking to your College Tutor(s), if you think this is happening to you.

3. Reading

In your tutorials, in most subjects, you'll be given reading-lists for the coming week; if these are long, the tutor should give you some idea of the priorities. Don't be afraid to ask for such advice, or to comment to tutors on their reading-lists. Tutors are not infallible, and are keen to improve their reading-lists in the light of students' comments. Don't buy books till you have obtained advice on what is essential; tutors and students in senior years will always guide you on this. The following points may be helpful:

- (a) Books need to be read differently depending on their function. A complex argument, a work of theory or a literary text may need to be read closely, and several times; a book containing information can be skimmed or scanned, and only bits of it actually read. Get used to thinking critically about why you're reading what you're reading: what it is you want to get out of it, and what your strategy should be. Be aware that different books or essays will require different amounts of time – besides length, content is a factor, and so is experience: as you become more familiar with a topic, you will be able to read much more efficiently and selectively than you can when you are just beginning to get to grips with it.
- (b) Make sure you know your way round the libraries that can help you – faculty libraries, the Bodleian, the Radcliffe Science Library and so on, as well as the College Library. And be aware that librarians aren't just people who sign books in and out. They are experts in helping you to find what you want, both in the libraries and online. Again, make full use of Oxford's remarkable library provision. And be an active reader: students are welcome to suggest particular books, including multiple copies, for purchase by the College Library (see the Librarian for a form).

- (c) There are always more sources of information available than you could possibly read. It can be useful to 'skim' through a fair number of texts first to get an idea of how much relevant information they contain and then select a smaller number to work from. Don't just take the first book on the reading list back to your room and assume that it will be good enough.
- (d) You don't necessarily have to read a book from cover to cover. You need to get into the habit of using books as tools and to pick and choose within them, with the aid of the index and the page of contents. It is often worth reading the Preface or Introduction to the book (or in the case of larger texts, to the chapter or section) to get some idea of the content.
- (e) The most important thing is not how much you read, but how much you take in. So if you find yourself getting tired or bored, do something different, or alter your body position (you can't read lying down or standing up as easily as sitting), or take a break.
- (f) The library does not only exist for students in the arts and social sciences: mathematicians, physicists, chemists, as well as medics and other scientists, will find books extremely useful in pursuing their studies. You should not think that tutorials and lectures alone will tell you everything you need to know and understand.

4. Note-Taking

Note-taking while reading serves three functions: (i) it is a method of collecting together the relevant material from different sources in one place to aid revision; (ii) it is a way of recording your opinions and understanding of a topic and, in particular, flagging to yourself areas that you don't understand and need to address or ask for help with later; and (iii) it is a useful exercise to make sure that you are actually thinking about what you read.

If you own the book you are reading, you can of course mark it up with marginal comments and underlinings, though with large books you will need an index to access your notes with (try little slips of paper kept in books with page references and short indications of what you thought was important on those pages). There are at least two pitfalls to avoid when taking notes:

- (a) If you find yourself taking notes that are almost as long as the original, you're wasting time and not really selecting and digesting the material enough. Your notes usually need to contain only the bare bones of the argument or theory, together with the necessary illustrations, quotations or facts. A good way of stopping yourself from taking too many notes is not to write anything with the book open: read a bit, close the book, and then write down what was important, checking any details that really matter. It is also a good idea to include with your notes the source of the material (book title, author and page numbers, for instance), so that you can go back and check or add to your notes at a later date if necessary.
- (b) Notes that are illegible and unattractive to look at will not help you when you need them, because you won't want to come back to them. This means that your notes need headings, diagrams, tabulation, coloured ink, highlighting, etc – anything that makes the major points stand out.

You'll need to make a decision early on whether it will be more helpful to keep notes on your computer or in paper form, (many College Tutors continue to recommend this – it is worth asking their advice) how much to photocopy or download (just photocopying or downloading something doesn't mean you've even read it, let alone digested it), whether to have loose-leaf or bound files, etc. All these things are matters of common sense and personal taste, but if you have difficulties discuss them with your College Tutor(s) and/or with people in the same subject in the year above you.

5. Lectures

Lecture lists can generally be viewed on departmental or faculty websites. Your College Tutor(s) will typically provide guidance on which lectures are most useful to attend; if they don't, then ask them. In most subjects lectures form an integral part of the course and are viewed as complementary to tutorials or classes. In some subjects, notably in the sciences, they are the main form of teaching, and are normally regarded by College Tutors as compulsory. Lectures also have the following advantages:

- the lecturer is usually more up-to-date than the text books or your tutor (they have access to a wider range of source material and the latest ideas, often because they are doing the research themselves);
- the lecturer may well have a different viewpoint or a different way of explaining things from any of the texts or from your tutor (and you may learn far more by comparing different approaches to one subject than you would learn by relying on a single source);
- the lecturer may just be very good at making their subject interesting, exciting and/or relevant;
- the lecturer may be so well-known in your subject that it is interesting to find out what sort of person they are, irrespective of what they say.

So ...

- (a) You should regard lectures as important. Get into the lecture habit early. For a start, it's interesting and rewarding to see who your contemporaries are from other Colleges and to hear their tutors holding forth. Many people regret, after graduation, not having taken the chance of hearing X or Y.
- (b) It is a good idea to take notes in lectures, if only because this helps you to concentrate on what is being said. But if you take very detailed notes in a rapidly-delivered lecture, they'll all be scribbled in a hurry, and will be very unattractive to come back to. The first priority is to understand what is going on. It's usually best to concentrate on the overall thread of the argument, and take down the major points made, rather than try to get down everything the lecturer has said. Some people expand their notes by writing them out after the lecture; if you do this, it's important not to delay too long before writing up! In Mathematics for example there will be times when you have to adopt the opposite approach of taking full notes and digesting them later.
- (c) It is often worth persevering with lecture courses even though you may feel that you are not getting anything out of the first lecture or two. You may have done the work already - but you will probably understand the subject better for having gone through it twice. You may feel the lectures are not relevant to the work you are doing at present, but they may be relevant to work that you will be doing next term or next year. You may have difficulty understanding what is going on, but even if you only understand 10% of the ideas, that still gives you a 10% start if you have to tackle the subject later in tutorials or classes. You may find the lecturer boring, but that doesn't make what they say any less useful. It is fine to dip in and out of lecture courses – at least in the arts and social sciences: lecturers will often give a list of topics in the first lecture, so you can decide which lectures in a series you wish to attend.

There are two other points worth making, which apply to some subjects and particularly to the sciences:

- (d) In subjects where the source material is diverse and widely scattered, the lecturer will have spent time and energy on searching out material, sifting and ordering it. Why repeat all that hard work yourself?
- (e) Examiners may use the lecture courses to decide on the sorts of things they will set questions on and the depth of knowledge they expect in the answers, as well as basing specific questions on material that they know has been covered in detail and is available to all students.

In arts and social science subjects, it is possible to go to too many lectures (though this is not a very common plight...), and thus to make your working day too fragmented. You will need to judge what is best, but it might be better to err on the side of too many rather than too few, at least to begin with.

Scientists will have many lectures and practical classes to attend. Practicals are not just important, they're compulsory, and you need to become proficient at them – writing up the work you did, as well as spending time efficiently in the lab. You will also need to bear the demands of lectures and practicals in mind in planning your work for tutorials. Think ahead!

6. Tutorials

Tutorials are a major method of teaching in Oxford in all subjects, and the main method in humanities subjects, so it is important to know what the tutorial method of teaching is. In some terms your College Tutor will take some of your tutorials personally. In others you may be sent to another tutor, sometimes a Fellow of another College or a member of a science department, who specialises in the particular area which you are studying that term.

Tutorials have three broad purposes: to assess how far you have mastered the work assigned to you (writing an essay, completing maths problems etc); to help you solve difficulties and explore questions which have arisen in the course of that work; and to offer guidance with a view to further progress. If you don't enjoy your tutorial, something has gone wrong. You won't enjoy it if ...

- (a) ...you haven't done enough work for it, because then you won't have got to the point where there's something interesting to discuss and argue about. You may also end up covering more basic material in the tutorial which you could have coped with perfectly well if you had done it on your own, and not covering more advanced material where you subsequently discover (too late) that you do need help;
- (b) ...you get worried about handing in work that is not perfect or by being wrong. The purpose of the tutorial is not to assess how good you are. It is to identify the areas where you are stronger and weaker, to reinforce the former and to help you improve the latter. If you try to hide areas of weakness in your written work then the tutor will find it much more difficult to identify them and you will get less useful advice as a result;
- (c) ...you sit there silent and wait for your tutor to entertain or enlighten you. A tutorial should produce an exchange of ideas; the more you put into it, the more you'll get out of it. Use it to get your questions answered, to try out ideas, to get guidance on aspects of the reading that have puzzled you, and to get comments on your written work. Don't be afraid to reveal your ignorance - your tutor isn't grading each tutorial according to how much you know;
- (d) ...you get worried by disagreement. Discussion is the name of the game. Oxford tutors quite often disagree with what you say to encourage you to express yourself clearly and think on your feet, and to make sure that you have good grounds for the argument presented in your written work. So don't get worried; however much flak you run into at first, you may eventually find that your tutor agrees with the position you've taken up. Or if the tutor disagrees, it may be in ways that are helpful to you in formulating your own ideas. Tutors enjoy argument, and won't in the least be offended if you disagree with them, provided that you have good reasons for doing so. Do also be prepared to argue with your tutorial partner(s) (and to carry on after the tutorial – you can learn a lot from each other);
- (e) ...you spend the whole time in the tutorial scribbling notes. It is of course important to note down something about the essential points made, but a tutorial is not a lecture, and tutors aren't oracles. Jotting down the odd key-word in the course of the discussion should be sufficient, and you can then write up the essential points after the tutorial is over. The main thing is debate, discussion and the habit of exchanging ideas with your tutor and with other students.

It is important to turn up for your tutorials on time and, if work has to be handed in in advance, to present it by the set time. If you can foresee anything which will prevent you from doing either, let the tutor know in advance. If any unexpected emergency intervenes, contact the tutor as soon as possible to explain what has happened.

Occasionally, you may encounter problems with your tutorials which you feel are not of your making. You may, for instance, find that for one reason or another you do not get on with your tutorial partner, and feel that you would benefit from a change. Or perhaps you feel that your tutor is not explaining some points adequately, or is not making it sufficiently clear to you how you are progressing. Usually the best course is to talk frankly to the tutor (normally after making an additional appointment, rather than in the tutorial hour itself). Many problems can be sorted out in this way. If you feel reluctant to talk to your tutor (e.g. in a case where the root of the problem is a bad personal relationship with your tutor) then you should arrange to talk to your College Tutor (if the issue involves an external tutor), the Senior Tutor, or one of the people mentioned in section 9.

7. Written Work

Written work varies greatly from subject to subject. You should get guidance from your tutor on just what they expect of you (length, level of detail, structure). The purpose of the tutorial is not solely to comment on the student's written work: written work will typically give rise to a more general discussion or exploration. Your tutor may not give you precise grades for each essay or problem-sheet; constructive criticism and advice is more helpful than placing you in a league table (end-of-term reports may well give you a predicted grade). You may find that not all of your work is marked – when you have read out an essay at the beginning of a tutorial for example. You should not worry about this: you will be getting plenty of feedback and you learn a lot simply by doing the written work required of you.

8. Monitoring your Progress and Feedback

Continuous monitoring of students' progress is a central part of the educational process (particularly important in Oxford, where many students have only two sets of University examinations during their course). The most important form of informal monitoring and feedback is during tutorial discussions, in fact one way of viewing a tutorial is as a one-hour verbal feedback session on the work you have done that week.

Every term a written report is produced by everyone teaching you, and sent to the College. These reports are available (by a system called OxCORT) to you, your College Tutor(s), and to the Senior Tutor; they provide an up-to-date assessment of progress and indicate areas of possible concern. Students with reports indicating serious concern are likely to be seen by the President and the Senior Tutor early in the following term; they may also be placed on the Academic Support and Disciplinary Procedure, which is described in the College Rules.

There are also three other formal forms of monitoring, each – rather confusingly - called 'Collections'.

- (a) Start-of-term Collections: At the beginning of each term (normally on Friday and Saturday of 0th week, the week before teaching starts) tutors regularly set examinations, which are normally designed to test work done in the previous term. At the end of the previous term your tutors will give you notice of what collections you may be set, and you should plan your vacation work accordingly. Collections are taken very seriously: they are written under examination conditions, and are marked by the tutors who have set them. Your tutor should return your collection to you in a reasonable time, normally in person, and should give you an assessment of it either in writing or orally. If your tutor does not offer to discuss your collection, but you feel that some discussion would be helpful, do not be afraid to ask.
- (b) End-of-term Collections: College Tutors arrange to meet each student individually, to discuss his/her report and the term's work more generally. These meetings are usually called 'end-of-term collections'. They provide an opportunity for each student to have a discussion of the term's work, to ask questions about progress and to make any comments which s/he thinks appropriate. Do not feel too shy to raise anything you want to discuss. Your tutors will tell you how they think you're doing, and they will welcome any reasonable comments you want to make.

- (c) Presidential Collections: Once a year during your course, you will have a rather more formal meeting with the President of the College, the Senior Tutor and one or more of your College Tutors to review your progress. The procedure is similar to that of end-of-term collections, except that the emphasis will be on surveying the whole year's work.

Tutors may sometimes set collections at other times than at the beginning of term, e.g. as part of preparation for an examination. Once again, you may ask for a collection if you think that it would be helpful; it will then be up to your tutor to decide whether a collection would be useful.

Collections do not count towards your degree result. They are a means by which the College monitors your progress, not part of the University's examining mechanism. College Prizes are awarded for outstanding performance in collections; poor performance may lead to sanctions, such as being placed on the Academic Disciplinary Procedure.

However, the very best way of monitoring progress is for the student to do it for themselves. Frequently, you will be the first person to know if your standard of work is slipping. If you can't address the problem on your own, it is much better to take the responsibility and ask for help than to wait until your College Tutor finds out via a less direct route.

9. Personal Problems

If your work is going badly, then other worries are likely to build up. But sometimes it is the other way round, and personal problems can cause your work to suffer. On the role of your College Tutor in this area, see section 1 above. You may, however, prefer to discuss things confidentially with someone else: in that event it will be helpful to let your tutor know that you are seeking advice elsewhere. For more specialised help you may wish to consult the Dean of Welfare, the Welfare Tutors, the College Nurse or the College Doctors. The University Counselling Service offers professional counselling, and you may well be referred to it by any of those just mentioned (or of course you can approach the Service yourself). Money worries can also affect your ability to concentrate on your studies; for advice on what to do in such a situation you should consult the Bursar.

You will be given more information about welfare services in the course of Freshers' Induction. The most important thing to remember is that there are a great many sources of advice and help available, so don't be afraid to ask.

We look forward to welcoming you to Corpus in October. If you have any questions about this document, feel free to email senior.tutor@ccc.ox.ac.uk. You will be given further advice by your subject tutors when you arrive.