

OXFORD INDIVIDUAL TUITION

Oxbridge Entrance

Here are the main components of preparation for Oxbridge Entrance.

1. A-level tuition

This ensures that the applicants achieve the required grades. The same principle applies to *all* A-level candidates. Oxbridge requirements, however, are particularly challenging; not only is at least three A grades the minimum requirement (and sometimes A*s too), but candidates are also often asked to send in the exact scores achieved in every A-level module for which they have received results. In short, every mark counts.

Tuition for post-A-level applicants so that they retain, expand, and refine their grasp of the subject is a variant of this. Without tuition, it is likely that many such applicants will do little academic work between finishing their last A2 paper in June and their Oxbridge interview in December – and *no* work which is properly directed. As a result, their subject grasp has often deteriorated by December to well below that of *pre*-A-level candidates a year their junior. In the days when Oxbridge applications were overwhelmingly *post*-A-level, the ‘seventh term’, celebrated rambunctiously, sensationally, and, therefore, misleadingly in Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*, was designed to prepare for the entrance examinations. Now schools have abolished this, leaving a vacuum which we can fill.

2. Interview practice

This is often considered the core of Oxbridge preparation. There are two focuses: first, on the type of questions liable to be asked; and, more elusively, on the variations in manner and behaviour to be expected from the interviewers. Some, for example, are challenging and slightly aggressive; others exhibit a deceptive faux diffidence, and then strike – the oblique ‘snake-in-the-grass’ approach.

The complement, of course, is the approach that the interviewees themselves should take to answering these questions and *vis-à-vis* their personal behaviour and attire. Both extremes – severe shyness or sycophancy; and brashness or arrogance – count against the candidate. Our aim is to build up a *justifiable* self-confidence politely expressed.

The number of ‘mock’ interviews advisable of course varies with the individual. There may be a general one alongside the subject interviews. Candidates often find the former more challenging, as they cannot fall back directly on their usually impressive subject knowledge. Even general interviews, however, are largely based on the contents of the interviewee’s ‘Personal Statement’. Written feedback is given after each mock interview, and so the candidate’s progress over a series of them can be closely plotted.

3. Preparation for the tests

These tests are administered by the various faculties concurrently with the interview. Up to the mid-1990s, the structure, as opposed to the questions, was uniform and straightforward. Oxbridge set their own Entrance Examinations whose essence was a subject paper (in Chemistry, History, and so on) rather more challenging than its A-level equivalent, plus a General Paper. Then, to broaden access, the two universities abolished these and announced that they would rely solely on A-level grades and interview.

For Oxbridge, however, this was an unnatural act. And soon tests came first creeping and then gushing back – but piecemeal. The result is a hotchpotch: some faculties use an informal version of the old subject tests (e.g. Classics at both universities); others have frankly reinstated what are essentially the old entrance examinations (e.g. the BMAT for Medicine applications); others again use a general examination designed to test intelligence rather than subject knowledge (e.g. History at Oxford). And a few faculties genuinely do stick with the interview alone. In certain subjects, especially at Cambridge, the use of the relevant tests is left to the colleges themselves – which further bedevils applications. We can guide through this maze and obtain the past papers where relevant.

4. Advice on choice of college

That some colleges are more difficult to get into than others in a given subject is a stubbornly persistent but half-camouflaged truism. Hence candidates whose chances are real but moderate would be ill-advised to target the top college in their chosen fields; conversely the near genius might want the very best. However, this status of ‘top college’ may *not* be persistent, set in stone: colleges are in their own way very competitive. So advice on targeting your application that was sound enough four years ago may now be out of date. The optimum college for any given individual now may not be the one we would have recommended then.

There are more general considerations. That certain colleges snobbishly reject regionally accented state-school candidates is a myth which has been untrue for decades. In the present climate, however, mirror image discrimination is a possibility. Oxbridge is under pressure to admit more state-sector applicants, and certain colleges seem to take this more seriously than others. In the light of this, sometimes candidates may be advised to avoid or to apply to certain colleges.

Finally, personal factors: candidates may find one college rather than another more to their taste, for which (proverbially) there is no accounting.

5. The dispelling of false impressions

This is closely allied to (4), but wider-ranging still. The commonest cliché is that Oxbridge is still mired in the social elitism of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (untrue in large part, even in *Brideshead*'s own 1920s). Conversely, but more rarely, well-connected families may find false comfort in *Brideshead*, glossing the myth to assume that because the applicant's parents and grandfather were at Balliol or King's, he or she will virtually inherit a place. Fears of *intellectual* and *academic* élitism are better grounded, but may deter candidates who are in fact perfectly competitive in these stakes – the sole ones that are essential. We will assess how academically realistic a given application is: see (1) and (2), and in part (4) above.

We also arrange for current undergraduates and postgraduates to unveil the realities of present-day student life and to show candidates around. Many people find the youthful informality of such contact reassuring in itself.

For this and for (4) above, our location in Oxford and our daily working with such current members of the University, is a huge asset. We can gather the latest (especially unofficial) information, and generally keep pace with the fluid realities. Even with present-day communications, the staff of schools and colleges at a distance, however astute, run the risk of being out of touch, and so out of date in their advice; or else they have to rely on just one or two informants on the spot, whose counsel may be slanted. We also have a range of close contacts in Cambridge and members of our staff visit there frequently.

6. Meeting other Oxbridge applicants

Oxbridge applicants may well wish to meet each other. In certain schools and colleges they may feel isolated. We offer, if there is sufficient take-up, group discussions open to candidates in all subjects, on the *general* aspects outlined above. A sense of *esprit de corps* can be a useful psychological advantage.

The above components need not come as a package, but can be taken selectively. Practically everyone, however, needs (2): Interview practice.

Clive Jenkins, Oxford Individual Tuition
19th June 2010