



**ST HUGH'S COLLEGE, OXFORD**

# Studying at Oxford

A guide for Undergraduates

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## **What is this Guide for?**

This is an introduction to what is distinctive about studying at Oxford. It is not a general guide to study skills (although it does contain suggestions about where you might go to find out more about these). It is designed to help you make the transition from study at school/college to university study in the tutorial system.

Because it is aimed at students for all courses, the guide is necessarily general. For advice specific to your subject, the best source of information will be the meetings you will have with your tutors in the first week or two of your time at Oxford. You may also find it useful to speak to your college 'parents' or to other undergraduates doing your subject. In your first week here, I will be holding a session for all new undergraduates where I set out the main areas I think you need to concentrate on in order to make a successful start at Oxford. This guide is an extended 'lecture handout' to go with that session, and I hope that it will be something you can keep and refer back to during your time here.

*Professor Roy Westbrook  
Senior Tutor*

## **How is Studying at Oxford Different from Studying at School or College?**

At Oxford, you are responsible for your intellectual development. Until now, most of you have had teachers and advisers looking after you. Even if you had little help outside lessons in your school or college, you still had a clear and busy timetable and a strictly defined syllabus.

Things are very different here. Oxford offers intellectual freedom, but that comes with responsibility, and responsibility is what you now have to develop. Your tutors are here to support you if you get into difficulties, but it is important to remember that Oxford is not school. We will treat you as our intellectual equals, and we consider it patronising to tell you exactly when and how you need to work. We expect you to want to work, and to be here because you want to be here. We share your feeling that working and studying in Oxford is an enormous privilege, and we want you to be proud of your achievements in getting here and eager to make the most of what Oxford offers.

### **Taking responsibility**

On a practical level, this means it is up to you to work out which lectures you need to be in, when you need to attend meetings, where to find the books and articles on your reading list, and how to plan your time so that you can succeed. Don't underestimate how important it is to have these day-to-day things sorted out from the start, no matter how trivial this kind of organisation may seem. Buy a diary and notebooks, or make use of the electronic calendar and 'to do list' functions on your phone. One of the hardest things for new students at Oxford to come to terms with is just how much non-timetabled time there is in the week (especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences), but how much reading and writing and thinking has to be fitted into that time. Try to work out now how many hours of work you can reasonably do in a day, when you will need to get up in the morning, and when you will take time off to do other things or just to do nothing. Your timetable will change even in your first term, but if you start ambitiously, carving out as many hours as you can for your academic work, you will enjoy it and make a success of it.

On an intellectual level, you will realise quickly that you have arrived in a place where everyone shares the interest in the life of the mind that brought you here. This should feel liberating, but it may also be daunting. Often, you will have been among the very best students at your school or college. Here, everyone is like that. Don't be put off: it's natural to feel worried or intimidated from time to time. Be assured that you have been chosen by your tutors because you are clever and you love your subject, and that means that you have the potential to do well at Oxford.

## The Tutorial System

The tutorial system is refreshingly different from the school/college systems of continuous assessment that you may have worked in before. Oxford deliberately chooses to use formal examinations at fixed points in your course as the main method of formal assessment for your degree. This leaves the tutorial free to become the space in which you can work with your tutor to develop your interests and abilities. This means that you should feel free to experiment with how you write essays and approach problems, trying different methods until you find the most successful. Because your weekly tutorial work doesn't formally count towards your degree, you don't just have to find a template for producing work that will get you the necessary marks (as you may have had to do at school/college). In essay-based subjects in particular, it will take a good deal of time to develop a strong essay style, and the best way to develop this is to keep writing more essays. Remember that 'essay' comes from the French 'essai' ('attempt'). The first essays you write will be far from perfect, and the point of the tutorial system is to help you get better.

### Marking

Another shift between school/college and Oxford is the way we approach our subjects here. There is a syllabus in every degree, with areas that need to be covered, but we are aware that in each of these areas, we can never know everything there is to know. In school modules and exams, it is possible to get full marks, whereas at Oxford this is very nearly impossible (even your tutors would be extremely unlikely to get full marks if they took university examinations now). You can never know the whole syllabus. This is because degrees at Oxford are strongly connected to the ever-developing research being done by tutors. There is always more to read and understand, and there are always more problems to solve. At school/college you may have been used to getting 90% or higher in your exams and assessments. At Oxford, it would be unusual for even the strongest student to get higher than, say, 75% in an examination.

### Feedback

New students are often puzzled if they don't receive clear marks on essays or work done for their tutorials. Some tutors will offer specific numerical marks, or a rough indication of where your work might fall within the degree classification system used at Oxford (1<sup>st</sup>, 2.1, 2.2, 3<sup>rd</sup>), but some will deliberately not do this. Students will sometimes ask their tutor what, precisely, they should have done to gain extra marks or to turn their essay from a second class piece of work to a first class piece of work, but the nature of the tutorial system at Oxford means that there is seldom a quick, mechanical answer to such a question. The way to improve your work is to do more work, read more, and thereby develop your intelligence and perception, and this takes time. The feedback you receive on your work is the discussion that you have within the tutorial hour. It is up to you to take time after your tutorial to consider what implications that discussion has for your understanding of that week's topic or area, but also what implications it has for how you approach your subject more generally.

## Three Key Skills

Aside from the particular study skills you should develop for your subject, there are three main areas that you should look at as you begin your career at Oxford. Effective study is all about making sure that the academic cycle of work happens as quickly, smoothly and fully as possible. In your first weeks at Oxford you should treat yourself consciously as an experiment. Observe yourself. Keep a notebook of the hours you work, noting where, when and what you do.

### **Working out when and where you work best**

Most of you will go to between one and three lectures each day. You will have between one and three tutorials each week, as well as classes in some subjects. If you're a scientist, you'll also have labs for several afternoons each week. This leaves a lot of hours, so what you need to do now is to work out two things. First, what is the earliest you can sensibly get up and start work? Second, when is your most productive and creative time of day? Save that productive time for the things you find hardest: this might be planning your essay, working on longer problems, or reading a difficult book or article. Everything else goes into the hours that are left.

If you find you are really tired, then you should stop working, and you should always take at least one full day each week away from work. But if you find you're bored, or a bit tired, you can still use the time productively. Look things up on the internet; work through a set of problems again; read through your essay as though you're an editor, slicing out words; go and get books out of the library; photocopy journal articles.

Many people work in their room, but you should also think about working in libraries (the college library, the faculty or department library, or the Bodleian). You may find that you like to work in one place all day, or that you prefer to move to a different library for the afternoons or to do a different kind of work.

### **Developing fluency**

Once your timing is right, and you've found the right place(s) to work, then you can focus on your fluency. And that means writing, whether you're doing an essay-based subject or not. It means linking what goes on in your head with what goes on to the page. From now on, you must start expressing your thought processes as paragraphs, long notes, formulae, problems or questions. If you are doing a science subject, this means knowing the formulae and the principles that will unlock everything else. You should take time weekly, or more regularly if you can, to learn the necessary formulae and principles that will form the basis for everything else. The principle of repetition and fluency stands whether you are in an arts or a science subject. If you don't have the basics, every problem is going to be like reinventing the wheel, so take the time to learn them now. You will know that there are things you didn't quite master at A level. Get hold of the relevant textbooks and tables and fill in the gaps in your knowledge.

If you are doing an essay-based subject, everything you do from now on will be about presenting a coherent argument in an interesting and readable way. What you must not be tempted to do is to be linear in preparing your essays. You'll get a reading list and an essay question, and your instinct will be to get all the books out, read them in order whilst taking copious notes, and feel very virtuous about writing twenty sides of A4 and putting them in a folder. Then you will start looking at the essay question, stare at your notes and hope that something will happen. This is not the best way of tackling an essay.

Instead, you need to train yourself to link thinking and writing together, from the very beginning. The moment you get an essay question, start jotting possible answers and structures down. You can do it as your tutor is telling you about it. You should walk away from the tutorial, get a notebook and start writing. Once you've read one article on the reading list, write a little bit more, this time noting down an introductory paragraph to your essay, or a conclusion, or a paragraph on one particular point. Build up your essay as you go along. Ideally, you shouldn't ever find yourself with a stack of notes and a blank sheet of paper. You may throw lots of your jotted paragraphs away, but they are a great way to write an essay. You'll find that what tends to happen is that your first idea for an essay is the one you come back to, but you need to go through a process of modification in order to make that first idea work effectively.

### **Dealing with problems**

There will be times when you haven't left yourself long enough to do the work, or you hit writers' block, or you just can't do something.

If you run out of time, don't be afraid to take good short cuts. Read one of the titles in the Oxford University Press 'Very Short Introduction' series, or use Google to look up basic facts. Use Wikipedia (but do so with very great care, and only ever use it as a starting point). Write the most important points for your essay down on one side of A4, and then take yourself to the library and give yourself one hour to write an exam-length answer to a question. Then add more to that basic essay or basic problem. Compress the process. The result won't be as good as if you'd spent enough time on it, but it will take you through the process again, and that's what's important.

If you get writers' block, or you just find something too hard, you should try measuring time strictly, and reducing your working time to lots of very small slots. Go somewhere that isn't your room to impose a discipline on yourself. This can be a library, a coffee shop, or a park bench: anywhere that allows you to focus. Tell yourself you have ten minutes to write a paragraph or work through a problem, and put away your notes so you're not distracted. Again, the result won't be wonderful, but you'll have gone through the cycle.

If you really, really cannot do a piece of work, then you need to tell your tutor, or talk to a fellow student, or you just need to break the cycle. Go for a walk, watch a film, read a novel, or go for coffee. Don't suffer in silence. The advice in this guide about working hard isn't meant to frighten you. It's meant to make the work easier, but there may be times when work just won't happen. If you work steadily, these problems are less likely to surface, but if you do hit a wall, and none of your usual strategies works, then you should stop and ask someone for help.

## **Vacations and Collections**

### **Vacations**

You will find that your weekly reading lists and problem sheets cannot always be finished. This is partly a reflection of the fact that each subject area is huge, but it is also because of the way that terms and vacations work at Oxford. Terms are very short (just over eight weeks long), and it isn't possible to do all your academic work within term. You are expected to use your vacations to go back over your term's work and read more in the areas you want to focus on, as well as reading and working to prepare for the coming term. Collections on the previous term's work are generally held on the Friday and Saturday of 0<sup>th</sup> week and gowns should be worn.

### **Collections**

There are two sorts of 'collections' at Oxford, but both have the same purpose: to allow you to 'collect' up the work you have already done and reflect on what you need to do in the future.

The first 'collections' you will have will usually be the college examinations at the start of your first Hilary Term (i.e. in January of your first year). Some subjects then hold exams at the start of every successive term. These are a kind of 'mock' exam, often on the topic or area you have been studying during the previous term. They do not form part of the formal assessment for your degree, but they will be taken seriously by your tutors, and should be taken seriously by you, as an indication of how well your work is progressing. They will also help you practise your exam technique for formal university examinations.

The other kind of 'collection' is your 'Principal's Collection'. Each year, you will meet the Principal, together with your personal tutor, to discuss how your work is progressing. These meetings are held to monitor your academic progress, and, in particular, to identify any areas of concern. Their purpose is to ensure that you are working as effectively as possible and that the College is providing the best possible teaching and learning environment for you. If there have been any problems with your academic work, the Principal and your tutor may ask you to give an account of these and you are also likely to be asked to discuss how you plan to ensure that you will be studying effectively in the coming terms. Similarly, if you have any concerns about the academic provision made for you, you should feel free to raise these in your meeting. You can also contact any of the tutors in your subject, the Senior Tutor, or the Principal at any time if you have concerns of problems.

## Examinations

Most formal assessment in Oxford takes place by means of a traditional examination. Your weekly tutorial work will give you 90% or more of the preparation that you need for these examinations, but there are three areas where you can also do some additional work to make sure you are revising and preparing effectively.

### Information

Information is power when it comes to exams. Make sure you consult the following:

- *student handbook* for your course. If you don't already have a copy, check your faculty/department website
- *syllabus* (including bibliographies etc)
- *examiners' reports* The syllabus and examiners' reports are usually on your faculty/department website, or can be obtained by asking in your faculty/department administrative office
- *old exam papers* – you can get these online and print or save as a pdf. Past papers don't predict exam questions, so don't be slavish in learning the exact answers to previous questions.

### Revision

- Remember that *revision is to get you to the point where you can do the exam* questions. It is not a self-mortification exercise in going over everything you should have done. Examiners don't know how many hours of revision you do, or whether you've written lots of neat notes. Revision is not about proving to yourself or anyone else that you've been a good citizen or that you are one now. It IS about two things
- *1 Revision is, of course, about making sure that you've remembered information in a fairly mechanical way.* So it is about remembering dates, formulae and quotations.
- *2 Revision is about becoming a bit of an exam machine*, and in that sense it's rather artificial. It's about learning to write in hour-long bursts, or learning to work through a problem and show your working clearly. It's about sharpening and focussing what you've already done during the academic year.
- *The two sides of revision (learning the factual information and turning yourself into an exam machine) must go on at the same time.* It's no good learning the formulae if you don't learn to apply them to things, or learning the dates and quotations if you can't present them properly in a written argument. When revising, you may be tempted to learn all the factual information and then approach the past exam questions. This gets things the wrong way round. The barrier with exams is learning to fit yourself into the structure of the questions, so you should try some past exam questions first, to find out what you don't know, and what you do know.

- Remember again that *this is not about reassuring yourself*. Your own notes, essays etc might help, but they might not. Be ruthless. If it's quicker to read a new article and make fast, new notes, do that. If it isn't, and you feel your own notes are good, use them.
- **Revision timetables**: block out a rough strategy, by paper, theme or topic. Don't spend hours on this. Just give yourself roughly enough time for each bit, and leave some time for holidays, rest and a bit of contingency time in case anything goes wrong.

### Exam strategy

- Think hard about *what is rewarded* in your subject in exams, and in the different kinds of papers. Is it strong argument, detailed case studies, a balanced account of a problem, or a short, elegant solution? Once you know that (and this is where examiners' reports come in handy) you can plan your revision accordingly.
- Remember that **Oxford exams reward consistency**, in each paper and across all papers. So treat each paper pretty evenly in terms of revision. Within exam papers, you should find a strategy that works for you that enables you to plan, prepare and write a balanced set of answers. For essay papers with the classic 'three essays in three hours' structure, you need to think now about what works best for you, and test out different strategies as you do collections and past exam papers. You may like to plan and then write each essay one after the other, or you may prefer to do all of your planning first and then write all three essays without a break for further planning.
- **Remember the problem of short weight**. In the classic 'three essays in three hours' exam, writing only two answers, even if they both get 100%, won't get you a first. 200 divided by three is still only 66.6% overall (and Oxford examiners often penalise students if they don't attempt all the questions, so this overall mark would probably come down to 60% or even lower).
- **Be strategic about time**: how many problems or questions are there? If there are 5 equally weighted questions in a 3 hour exam, then you should allow 36 minutes per question, and be firm with yourself about sticking to your allocation of time for each question.
- Finally **ANSWER THE QUESTION**. Do not prepare answers and plug them into the exam. Prepare examples and individual points, but use them to answer the question. The examination is there to test your intellect, so use your intellect. When you see the question, don't ask yourself what answer you should write. Ask yourself what you honestly think the answer is.

Finally, remember that there is a big difference between exams at school and those at university when it comes to the marking system. Where some school exams may be marked by only one person working for an exam board, and may therefore be open to challenge or remarking, formal exams at Oxford are marked using a very strict process of checking and rechecking. Most scripts will be marked separately by at least two examiners, and the marks will be carefully discussed and reconciled.

Boards of examiners meet to set papers and to consider the marks that have been given in those papers, to make sure that the process is clear and fair. This means that you can be confident that the mark you receive for your examinations in Oxford is a fair and accurate reflection of how you performed in that examination. It also means that it is not generally possible to request a remark or review of your examination marks.

## College and University Regulations – Academic Conduct

The College and the University have regulations relating to academic conduct, standards and discipline. These regulations ensure that undergraduates are aware of what is expected of them and of the support to which they are entitled.

The Proctors' Office produce the 'University Student Handbook', formerly known as 'The Proctors' and Assessor's Memorandum' which can be found online at [www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/student-handbook?wssl=1](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/student-handbook?wssl=1) ). This sets out a range of information about the University, including notes on funding, health and welfare and examinations. You should note in particular that University examinations at Oxford are subject to a rigorous process of marking which does not allow for remarking or for appeals against marks (unless there is clear evidence of a flaw in the examination process). It is rare for undergraduates to fail their First Public Examination (which, in most subjects, is taken at the end of the first year), and those who fail one or more parts of this examination are given one opportunity to re-sit papers. Those who do not pass at resit are not permitted to continue at Oxford.

The College has its own guidelines for use in cases where an undergraduate's academic work is not satisfactory. These are set out below, and can also be found as Appendix B to the College's bylaws, available on the college website. Almost all undergraduates experience some difficulties with academic work as they go through their degree. Usually, these can be resolved through discussion in tutorials. If you do encounter problems, either with the content of the work you are doing, or with completing your work properly, you should seek help and advice from your tutors. Most problems can be solved quickly and easily. From time to time, however, it is necessary to invoke the College's academic disciplinary procedures to try to bring back an undergraduate's academic work to the necessary level. The academic disciplinary procedure has three stages:

### *1) Discussion and Informal warning*

If you are clearly not working at the level of which you are capable, your tutor may deem it necessary to issue you with an informal warning about your work. You will be given clear instructions about what you need to do to comply with the terms of an informal warning, which may include reaching a certain mark in your 'collections' at the start of term, for example. An informal warning may be issued if you are persistently late for tutorials or classes, if you are absent without an explanation or if you persistently fail to respond to instructions or messages from tutors. You will be told how long you have to meet the terms of the informal warning. In most cases, once an informal warning has been issued, undergraduates will apply themselves fully and ensure that the terms are met. An informal warning does not go onto your file: if you meet the terms and there are no further problems, that will be the end of the matter. If you do receive an informal warning from your tutor (or from the Senior Tutor on behalf of your tutor), you should ask yourself what

work you can do to remedy matters. If you have been suffering from any health or personal difficulties that have been making it hard for you to work effectively, you should not hesitate to let your tutor and/or the senior tutor know. Anything you say will be treated in confidence, and help and support is available to get you back on track.

## 2) *Formal warning*

If you have received an informal warning and failed to meet the terms set out in that warning, your tutor (or the Senior Tutor on behalf of your tutor) may issue you with a formal warning. A formal warning is recorded on your file, and will include terms which you need to meet in order to avoid being put on probation for your place at Oxford. These may include work that has to be completed, reaching a certain mark in specially set collections and/or ensuring that you attend all relevant classes etc and maintain good communications with your tutors. You will be told how long you have to meet the terms set out in a formal warning. If you successfully meet the terms, your formal warning period will end, although a note of it will be kept on your file.

## 3) *Probation*

If you have been issued with a formal warning and you have not met the requirements outlined in that warning, you may be placed on probation for your place at Oxford. You will be issued with a formal letter setting out the terms you need to meet in order to ensure that you do not lose your place. These may include work that has to be completed, reaching a certain mark in penal collections and/or ensuring that you attend all relevant classes and maintain good communications with your tutors, etc. You will be told how long you have to meet the terms of your probation. If you successfully meet the terms, your period of probation will end, although a note of it will be kept on your file. If you do not meet the terms of your probation, the Senior Tutor may recommend to the College's Academic Standards Committee that your course be suspended or terminated. There is an appeal process.

The three stages of the disciplinary procedures are designed to give you every opportunity to address any difficulties you are having with work and to prove to yourself and to your tutors that you are working to the best of your ability. It is extremely unusual for undergraduates to find that they cannot remedy academic problems that they are having and the College will do everything it can to support you if you do find yourself in difficulties. If you have questions or concerns about your academic work, the best course of action is to speak to someone about these as soon as possible.

## **When You're Not Working**

This guide is all about how to work and work successfully, but it is important to realise that although you should work very hard, you must not work all the time. Partly this is because you will be at your most academically creative and productive if you allow time to rest and recharge. But partly it is because, although you are here to do a degree, you are also here to do many other things. You will need to find a balance: keep up the interests you had in sport or music (or whatever else) at school/college and take the opportunity to develop new interests too. Make sure you spend plenty of time with your friends, that you get enough rest, and that you eat properly. Undergraduates are always tired at the end of a busy term, but you should never feel so exhausted that you can't enjoy your work and other things too.

If you do find yourself overwhelmed at any time, please remember there are lots of people you can talk to who will be able to help. Your personal tutor, the Senior Tutor and Academic Registrar, your college parents, peer supporters, the JCR's welfare reps, the College Counsellor and the University's Counselling Service are all there to help out if you need them. You should never feel embarrassed to talk to someone about any problems you have. Studying at Oxford is very different from anything you will have done before or will do again, and it's enormously exciting, but it can take time for new undergraduates to adjust to the way Oxford works.

## Suggestions for Further Reading

If you're looking for more specific advice about study skills, the best and quickest place to start is with the series of small guides sold in Blackwell's bookshop on Broad Street. At the start of each academic year, Blackwell's puts a stand of these guides by the main tills (and there are usually good '3 for 2' offers on them). They cover topics such as how to take notes, how to cite references, how to write essays, and how to read effectively for study.

The University's website has a very good section on Study Skills and Training, which includes sound advice on academic practice, and lists of online resources, such as course handbooks *etc.*

[www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills?wssl=1](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills?wssl=1)

The Health and Welfare part of the University's site also offers an array of self-help resources, including some very useful podcasts on academic-related matters, including perfectionism, sleeping well, and exam preparation.

[www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/counselling/self-help?wssl=1](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/welfare/counselling/self-help?wssl=1)

## Academic Feedback Form

[www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/currentstudents/academic-feedback-form/](http://www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/currentstudents/academic-feedback-form/)

Students are encouraged to use the online form to help the College to improve all aspects of its academic provision. Possible examples include:

- To give feedback (positive or negative) on a term's tuition
- To share comments about the syllabus or course materials for a particular option
- To comment on facilities (e.g., library provision, accessibility, disability support)
- To give feedback on particular tutors – College and External
- To suggest ideas for improvements and future initiatives

Feedback will be reviewed throughout the year by the Senior Tutor and discussed with organising tutors where appropriate. Please note that this form is for both anonymous and named feedback.

If you would like to discuss a matter urgently then please contact the College Office by email: [college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk); or telephone: 01865 274929.