

# PPE Application Guide

2021

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## Choosing a College

When deciding which college to apply to, you should look for factors that broadly differentiate the colleges and think about which you would prefer — here are some things to consider:

Would you prefer a college with a large number of students? More students means more sociable and more people to befriend but also busier and less peaceful.

Would you prefer a college with a larger grounds? A larger grounds means more space, but may be less lively at times.

Would you prefer a college that is more centrally located? A central location entails better links to other destinations, be it restaurants, bars, or other colleges, however it also means the college might attract more tourists, and be less spacious.

Would you prefer a college with a reputation for a certain activity, e.g., rugby, rowing, or music? Certain colleges have built reputations for high achievement in certain activities, and so if a given activity is important to you, you may wish to prioritise those colleges. For example, if you are a very keen rugby player you might choose a college with a reputation for having a strong rugby team, such as St Edmund Hall.

Would you prefer a college that has specific facilities e.g. squash court, gym, theatre? Some colleges, generally the larger ones, contain facilities such as these, although it is worth noting that they may be open to members of other colleges regardless.

Use this process to narrow down your selection of colleges — you should be left with just a few. At this point, it is best to use your contacts to see if there is anyone you can speak to at the colleges who can provide you with more accurate information (the Oxford website is going to make every college sound great), and answer any questions you may have. If you are struggling to find people at certain colleges, get in touch and we can help with this. Of course, if you have the opportunity, visiting the colleges in person is also a great way to help you decide, and students at the colleges will happily answer any questions you may have.

Some students consider applying to a less popular college in the hope that there will be less competition for spaces, increasing chances of a successful application. This is very inadvisable as Oxford will pull some applicants to colleges with fewer applications when it comes to interviews, in order to ensure that every college has the same number of interviewees per place. As such, applying to a less popular college will do nothing to improve your chances of admission, so you should apply to the college that most appeals to you.

It is also worth noting that the choice of college is not the most important decision, as 1) there is a possibility you may end up being pulled to another college anyway, and 2) there are no ‘bad’ colleges, and all have advantages and disadvantages — very few people end up disliking the college they end up at!

statement, as you wish to mention books you have read but want to go slightly further than simply naming them, and a short description seems like a good way to do this.

For example, “I recently finished Sunstein and Thaler’s ‘Nudge,’ where I enjoyed learning about behavioural economics, and how ‘nudges’ can be used to positively influence our decisions.” Now, at first glance, this comes across as a strong sentence. However, in reality, the student has named the book, and then given an extremely basic description of the book, with less detail than one might find on the back cover. The issues with this are, firstly, that they are conveying information that would take seconds to find on the internet, and so may not even convince tutors that they read the book, and, more importantly, that they are not displaying any deeper comprehension or analytical skills, or indeed any interest in the subject.

Instead, whenever you mention a book, you should always look to either discuss a specific part of the book that you found particularly interesting, discuss some context that made the book particularly resonant, or discuss aspects of the book’s thesis that you disagreed with. For example, “I recently finished Sunstein and Thaler’s ‘Nudge,’ where I enjoyed learning about behavioural economics, and how ‘nudges’ can be used to positively influence our decisions. However, I felt that inadequate attention was given to the ethical argument for nudges, as the ‘nudger’ may not be better equipped to make these decisions than the person being nudged.” Here, you are proving that you read the book, and understood it well enough to come to your own opinions about it, having critically evaluated the authors’ arguments.

Here is another set of examples:

“I recently finished Nassim Taleb’s ‘The Black Swan,’ where I learnt about how the risk of highly improbable events can be underestimated, leaving society unprepared for these great, impactful shocks.”

“I recently finished Nassim Taleb’s ‘The Black Swan,’ where I learnt about how the risk of highly improbable events can be underestimated, leaving society unprepared for these great, impactful shocks. The book was particularly interesting to me as it was in fact written before the 2007/08 financial crisis and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which have of course given further credibility to the author’s theory and demonstrated the necessity to heed his advice.”

Once again, you can see how in the second version, the book is still named and briefly summarised (less necessary if it is very well-known or if your comments on it make sense even without this summary), but then the book is discussed in further detail, not just to prove that you have read it but to display your analytical/critical skills, as these skills are essential for a PPE degree. Furthermore, discussion of books that you have read is the only opportunity you have in the personal statement to demonstrate skills that are required for the course.

And one final set:

“I first read Simon Blackwell’s ‘Think,’ a concise and informative introduction to several important philosophical topics.”

Outside the classroom, I have a range of hobbies and responsibilities. These are in almost every sphere of endeavour, including music, drama, and volunteering for numerous causes. Volunteering has been very important to me, and through my work with people from disadvantaged backgrounds I have stepped outside my realm of experience, gaining perspective on philosophical and political questions. These interests are joined by a love of physical activity and sports - I believe that a balance between mental and physical pursuits improves my focus and is crucial to my academic success. I look forward to continuing this as I work with tutors and fellow students in order to truly engage with humanity's greatest issues.

### Comments

As you can see, this personal statement follows a simple *introductory paragraph - politics paragraph - economics paragraph - philosophy paragraph - closing paragraph* structure, which makes it much easier and more pleasant to read. You will note that in the introductory paragraph, they talk about how studying these three subjects will give them a greater understanding of real world phenomena that involve all three, as opposed to suggesting that they will learn about the intersection of the three subjects through their study. Their economics and politics paragraphs, the subjects they are more familiar with, make good reference to readings as well as other sources of experience and signs of interest such as extra-curricular activities, competitions, and newspapers/magazines.

As they are less experienced in philosophy, the philosophy section is shorter and mainly discusses why they wish to study it, as opposed to their past experience with it. At the end you will note that they mention that they have read Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, a clear example of several mistakes that I mentioned earlier. Firstly, they do not discuss the book at all beyond saying that wanting to learn more about the nature of 'the good life' spurred them to read it, and secondly, it is unlikely that a book such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* would be read and understood by an 18 year-old with no philosophy experience whatsoever. As such, as well as the tutors likely being unconvinced that they have read the book, the whole sentence is simply a waste of characters. Much better would have been to say that their interest in ethics led them to read a much more accessible book such as Simon Blackburn's *Being Good*, and then to have a discussion about said book, perhaps about the topic they found most interesting. On the other hand, they offer a very good discussion of *Nudge*, as they display an impressive level of comprehension and analysis.

This student mentions anything they do which cannot be linked to PPE in their closing paragraph, devoting just 90 words to it, and even then, an effort is still made to link it to the course. Of course, this allowed them to devote more characters to discussion of the subjects, which is of much more important. This student was a successful applicant, and while their personal statement is far from perfect, it is well-structured and well-written, and one can see the amount of preparation and effort that went into it.



1. How much should we test a medicine before making it widely available?
2. Should statistics be a compulsory subject of study at school? Why, or why not?
3. Should Western nations refuse to trade with countries in which child labour is used?
4. In our country, every citizen has one vote. A scheme is proposed which allows anybody to buy additional votes if they want to, with the proceeds being used to pay for good causes. Would this be a good scheme?

As you can see, while the questions require similar skills and will all lead to interesting discussions, questions 3 and 4 are more pertinent to PPE, with both giving you the opportunity to discuss philosophy, politics, and economics if you choose to. Now, if you have a bright idea for an approach to a question that is not so relevant to philosophy, politics, and economics, you should not hesitate to go for it, as there is no rule saying that you must answer a certain question, and indeed an original approach to a question the PPE tutors have not read as many answers to will certainly be of more interest to them. However, given that there do tend to be questions more relevant to PPE than others, looking for them is a good place to start when you open your paper. Furthermore, as a PPE applicant it is likely that answering questions such as question 4 from the 2014 paper will be much more exciting to you anyway.

Now, given that you will likely have had significant practice writing essays throughout school, and there is no mark scheme, it is difficult to significantly improve your performance in this section through practice in the same way as section 1, which presents an unfamiliar format with extensive past papers with answers. Nevertheless, it is worth reading through [Oxford's Guidance on TSA Section 2](#) thoroughly, as this is the only official guidance on how to approach these questions, and what the examiners are looking for and then attempting a number of past paper questions. You may wish to just plan some — this is still good practice, but you should ensure that you have also practiced writing a few with the 30 minute time constraint. As there are no answers or mark schemes provided, there is less opportunity for continuous improvement as with section 1, and so it is not necessary to attempt every single paper, but you should do enough to ensure that you are confident by the time of the test. Here are all the official question papers available:

[TSA Oxford Specimen Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2008 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2009 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2010 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2011 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2012 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2013 Section 2](#)

[TSA Oxford 2014 Section 2](#)

Now, in addition to being useful for improving the content of your answers, mock interviews are important for improving your general interview skills. You should use the mock interviews as an opportunity to practice these skills, as they will also be important in your real interview. Below I have listed a few things you should be reminding yourself to do in each interview:

- Smile
- Make eye contact
- Pause and think before speaking
- Speak slowly and clearly
- Explain your thought process
- Enjoy yourself
- Be pleasant and polite
- Relax

A helpful way to think of the Oxford interview is as a mock tutorial. It is very similar to a tutorial in that you are asked questions and forced to defend your answers, and the tutors are essentially using the interviews to decide whether they would like to have tutorials with you for several years. Therefore, while it is very important to give well thought-out, original answers, these general interview skills are also important, such as being polite and speaking clearly. I have heard anecdotes from tutors who have said they did not admit candidates due to their being impolite to the other interviewer, and so it is good to remember that you do want the tutors to like you.

So, while the tutors want you to defend your own arguments as opposed to agreeing with them the second they come up with a challenge, you should avoid acting like the tutor's position is clearly wrong or ill-thought-out, or arguing with everything they say (while they may not believe in the position they are taking, as they are simply taking the opposing position to your own, they will still build a strong argument). When you are posed with a challenge, they want to see you understand the point they are making, consider how it impacts your argument, and then see if your argument can be strengthened. They do not want you to dismiss their challenge outright by simply repeating what you previously said. Further, any indication that you are enjoying the interview is a very good sign to the tutors as it suggests that you actually enjoy thinking on your feet and having to defend your arguments from criticisms, as opposed to just putting yourself through it to get into Oxford, as the reality is that once at Oxford you will have to do much more if it.

As with all interviews, the stress of the moment will cause time to feel like it's passing very quickly. As such, the second a tutor finishes their question you will feel an urge to give an immediate answer. It is important to restrain this impulse, and give yourself ample time to think (even if you feel like you have taken a long time, in all likelihood it will have been just a few seconds). The main reason for this is to avoid forcing yourself down some avenue that leads to an answer that is much harder to defend. If you think it through in your head first, you can ensure that you are giving the strongest answer you can think of. As the interview questions are deliberately tricky and challenging, the first answer you think of will likely be wrong. With many questions they ask, a good first step is to ask yourself what a good answer to the question would look like. For example,

51. What is the difference between Superman and Clark Kent?
52. What is a bubble?
53. Who is to say that nudism is wrong?
54. Do you think human reason is limited? If so, what limits it?
55. All cows are mammals, therefore all brown cows are mammals. Is there a predicate instead of 'brown' that would make the argument invalid?
56. If I try and draw a picture of you and it looks like Nelson Mandela, is it still a picture of you?
57. Is morality an achievable/real thing, given the vast differences in history between cultures and their stance on morality and moral codes?
58. If I were to kidnap you today, wipe all your memories and put you on a desert island in the middle of nowhere, would you still be the same you sitting in front of me now?
59. If I do this wrong thing, is it still wrong 100 years down the line, even if society's views have changed to make it right?
60. If you lose half of your brain you can survive as a completely normal functioning human. So if you take each half of your brain and put them in two exact clones of yourself what happens? Which one are you?
61. If you had infinite single dollar bills, how would you give infinite dollar bills to infinite people?
62. Differentiate between power and authority.
63. We screen people for adoption: should we screen for conception?
64. Was Robin Hood a hero?
65. If someone draws a chalk circle around you and tells you that if you step outside the circle you will be shot, are you free?
66. Is there a difference between personal and public morality? How can a leader deal with this?
67. How would you attempt to persuade someone who is a 'climate change sceptic'.
68. Is the sentence, 'this sentence is false,' true or false?
69. Why should a whale not be classified as a fish?

## **Politics**

70. What does democracy mean?
71. Do you think a US president that wins two terms wins by more in the first term or the second term? Then why are they only allowed to run for two terms? Why not limit them to one term?