



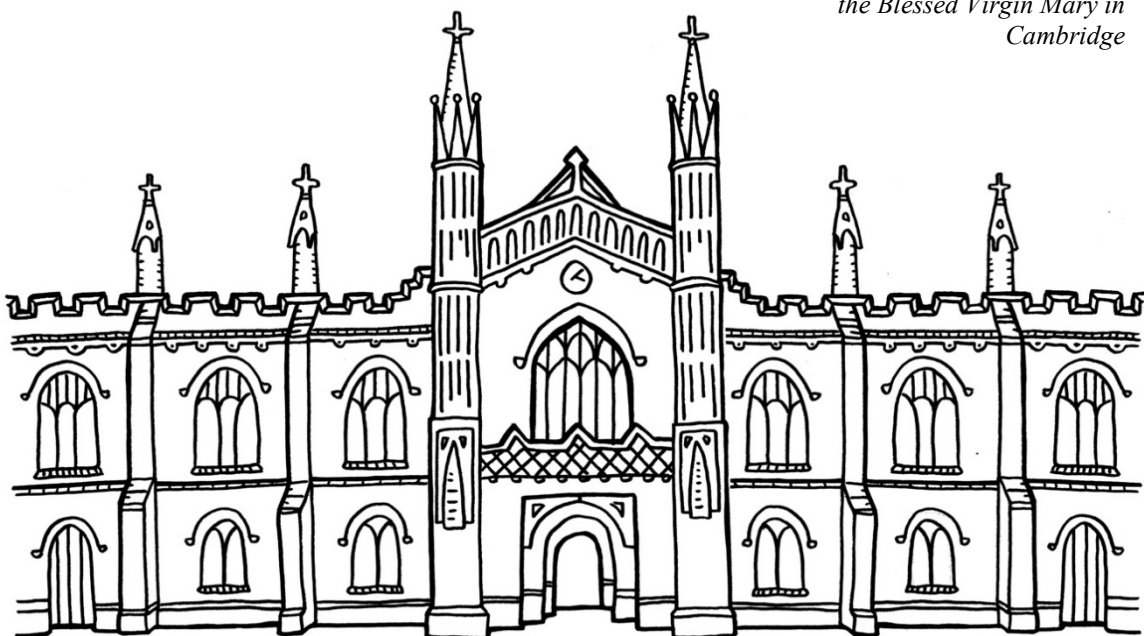
# Personal Statement Guidebook

Examples and Advice for Top University Entry

# Contents

Introduction.....	3
'Do's and 'Don't's.....	6
Introduction.....	6
Main Body.....	6
Conclusion .....	7
Personal Statement Exemplars and How to Use Them .....	9
Medical and Life Sciences.....	10
Physical and Mathematical Sciences.....	22
Social Sciences .....	35
Languages and Literature.....	48
Humanities .....	60
The Arts.....	72

*College of Corpus Christi and  
the Blessed Virgin Mary in  
Cambridge*



# Introduction

As an Oxford admissions tutor for PPE neatly puts it, winning personal statements, particularly for top research-focused universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, clearly answer three questions:

## **What is your motivation to study this area?**

*You would be surprised with how many personal statements do not really answer this question. By ‘motivation’ they want to see academic motivation – i.e. why study the law academically for three years rather than train as a lawyer after studying a different degree?*

## **What evidence do you have to support this?**

*Talk is cheap! You must support your alleged passion with evidence that you have pursued the subject area independently, beyond school. This ‘super-curricular’ evidence is, perhaps, the most important factor distinguishing otherwise strong applicants.*

## **Do you know what you are getting yourself in for?**

*Academics reading your statement need to be reassured you will flourish on the course. They want to see that the material you discuss is closely relevant, and that some of the content is typical of undergraduate study.*

Consider a love letter. For a love letter to be effective, it needs to be truly personal rather than derivative, or using other people’s words. It also needs to be vivid, providing evidence of love rather than empty words. It needs to be specific to the person it is addressed to, rather than being applicable to any similar love interest. It avoids emotional blackmail, pretentiousness, and forced wackiness, but instead is authentic to the writer and the purpose of writing. It needs to show rather than merely pay lip service to their devotion.

Markers of excellent personal statements mirror these attributes. The best personal statements:

- Show substantial independent pursuit of relevant subject matter – they follow interests. This does not stop at one article or one lecture but moves through several stages of development.
- Demonstrate mature reflection on subject engagement rather than credulous acceptance of material.
- Hit the target, speaking to some of the very core concerns, debates, and ideas in the chosen discipline rather than peripheral or vaguely connected areas.

### ***How, you ask?***

To achieve this, we recommend following these steps:

#### **1. Brainstorm your examples of ‘evidence’.**

Write down everything and anything you’ve done or thought about your subject. These are the pieces of evidence which will help to tell the story of your developing interests. These might include:

- Societies / clubs
- Lectures watched
- Books and chapters read
- Articles read (legitimate publications)
- Articles/blogs written
- Competitions entered
- Awards won
- Podcasts listened to
- Seminars attended
- Experiences
- MOOCs
- Projects / EPQ
- Summer schools
- Insight days
- Gap year or travel plans
- Topics of interest
- Personal connections to the subject
- Relevant work experience details
- Extracurriculars
- Reflections on the subject
- And so on...

## **2. Develop this content further through reflection and further research.**

During this ‘phase’, you might want to cluster some of your subject-related activities together to form broader themes or sub-topics to help give your statement some structure.

Your evidence might be too superficial to write a meaningful statement. For instance, you might realise that certain activities do relate to each other, but your investigation of the relevant area might be only very surface level so far. In that case, return to the research phase of writing and go discover more about the topic at hand.

Remember, that not every ‘category’ of super-curricular subject engagement will be equivalent in the eyes of admissions tutors. Ensure that at least some of your material is interesting at degree level.

This is also the phase in which you need to match your content with the courses you are applying for, to make sure it works across your desired choices.

## **3. Put your statement into a structure.**

There is no rule about how to structure your statement, but it can be a turn-off for admissions tutors when it appears candidates have obediently followed a formula – ‘insert A-Level skills here’, ‘insert 2 books here’, ‘insert Duke of Edinburgh here’. Generally, a well-structured personal statement will be broken up into five or six paragraphs and be easy to read. Structuring your statement allows a tired, time-short admissions tutor to ‘get’ what you are saying quickly. Remember to avoid overfilling your statement with facts so that it reads as a list; rather, ensure that you include your own impressions and thoughts about the ideas you discuss. They want to read an ‘I Think’ personal statement, not an ‘I List’ one.

A frequently successful structure follows this pattern: an introduction, two to three course/subject-specific main paragraphs, a penultimate paragraph detailing your extracurricular activities (leveraging them, if possible, to show dedication to your chosen subject), and then a final summary paragraph. The final two paragraphs are sometimes pushed together to form one.

Leave yourself enough time to redraft your statement several times – each time you look at it with fresh eyes, you will see ways to improve it and things to

add. For the first few drafts, make sure you spend your time strengthening the content. Once you are satisfied with the content, you can easily cut things out. Remember that your statement should cut down on flowery language and be concise so that you have space to show off yourself to the best of your ability.

Show your personal statement to tutors, teachers, and older friends for constructive feedback, but remember that you must be comfortable with how you come across in your Personal Statement. As with anything, the more time and effort you put into your statement, the better it will be – so start now!

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## 'Do's and 'Don't's

### Introduction

*This is your very first impression to the reader, so it counts! Think deeply about what draws you to your subject. Your introduction should be in harmony with what you say in the rest of the statement, so you may find it easier to write it later on.*

Do:

- Be personal, think about what is important to you about your subject- not what you think the admissions tutors want to hear.
- The intro test: if the tutors read only your introduction, nothing else, what would they learn about you?

Don't:

- Rely on obvious generalisations, such as 'I want to study PPE because of its interdisciplinary nature...' Anyone can say that!
- 

### Main Body

*This is the most important bit! While planning, use this box to write down your primary areas of interest within your subject and your super-curricular reading, research, and activities. You can then start to brainstorm how these will link together and coalesce into themes. These will form the basis of approximately three paragraphs.*

Do:

- ENGAGE deeply with the concepts or texts you are discussing. We don't want a shopping list! The tutors want to see if you are capable of the critical thought, creativity, and nuance needed on the course.
- With each idea or text, you are referencing, ask yourself: what intrigued me about this? What did I find surprising? What did I agree/disagree with? What questions did it raise? What did I go on to do next?
- SHOW don't TELL! It's no use claiming to have developed critical thinking skills, or to have a keen interest in Biology- prove it to me by the way you discuss it!

Don't:

- Tell the tutors what they already know! It's tempting to want to show off your knowledge but do this through *engagement* rather than *description*. Remember, you're not writing an essay. The subject of almost every sentence should be *you*. ~~'Blogg's book talks about...'~~ 'I was struck by Blogg's argument in his book...'
- Talk about the content of your A-levels (or equivalent), or try to show how it's useful to the course. The tutors already know this, and you can use the space much better.

## Conclusion

*This is normally brief and may include one or two references to extracurriculars. Again, you're best-off writing this after you've planned and drafted your main body, but you should make notes on any potential extracurriculars you wish to include.*

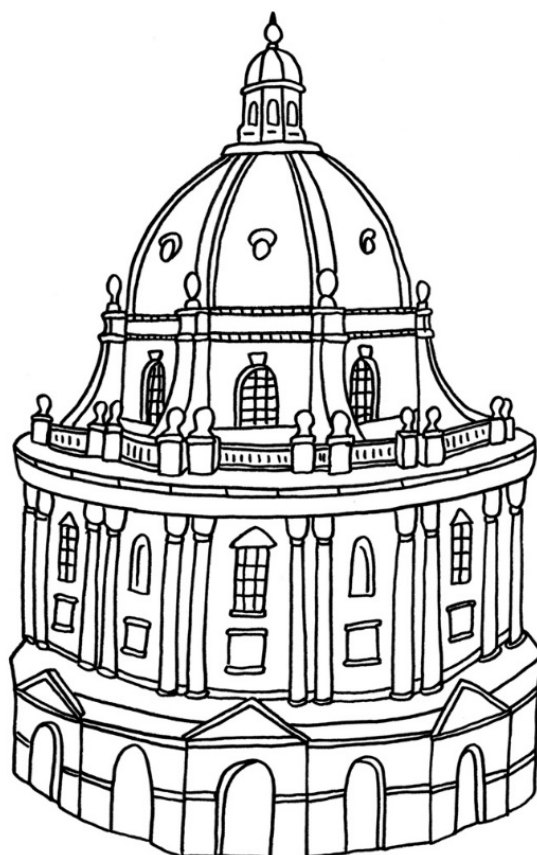
Do:

- Try to tie up what you have said in the rest of the statement.
- End on a note of interest (why I want to study Classics) rather than trying to prove suitability (why I would be a great student for Classics). Again, we're showing, not telling.

- Point towards future research and exploration- if you can show the broader horizon of where your academic interests might go, you identify yourself as more intellectually mature than the average sixth-former.

Don't:

- Spend too long on extracurriculars. These won't benefit your application so they're just the cherry on the top. Prioritise things that are genuinely important to you and that will help you to stand out.
- Use your extracurriculars to prove interests that aren't relevant to the course, such as leadership and teamwork.
- Bring in any new academic material at this stage.



*Radcliffe Camera  
Bodleian Library  
Oxford*



# Personal Statement Exemplars and How to Use Them

The thirty exemplars on the following pages were each successful in gaining a place at either Oxford or Cambridge, usually among other top university offers, and have been offered by our tutors and mentors for this purpose. They are arranged into six broad disciplinary areas and are intended to demonstrate a substantial range of subject areas, but do not represent every course offered.

Though these have all ‘worked’, by no means are they ‘perfect’ – partly because ‘perfect’ does not exist in any piece of writing, but also because the personal statement is only one jigsaw piece in your application. Someone with a stronger personal statement might be beaten to a place by someone with stronger predictions, reference, written work, admission test score, or potential shown at their interviews. Moreover, not all admissions tutors weight the personal statement equally. So, in these statements, you will see the occasional error in grammar or spelling, the odd awkward phrase, and sections which feel overly derivative, or general, or irrelevant.

These exemplars should, however, indicate some of the key qualities you may want to show, and reassure you that there are a range of ways to write them successfully. Regardless of the course you are applying for, you will find that personal statements need to show similar kinds of qualities in students, so we encourage you to read those related to your subject area but also more widely.

After each statement, you will find a short review, ‘What do we think?’, written by Oxbridge-graduate application consultants on our team, as well as some potential questions an interviewer may want to ask the candidate. These are intended to steer you on what kinds of details may interest your interviewers when they scan through your application.

Crucially, *do not be tempted to borrow phrases or emulate these statements*. Your statement will be put through rigorous plagiarism and AI-detection software when you submit it, and this will be picked up. Use these for broader awareness, and perhaps inspiration for the kinds of subject research which is valued by university admissions tutors. And so... to the statements!

# Medical and Life Sciences

## **Example One – Medicine, University of Cambridge**

Point to an aeroplane and my brother will tell you the exact year, month and day the aircraft was first flown. Growing up with my autistic brother, I have witnessed the challenges he has faced, highlighting the importance of tolerance, patience and a holistic approach to someone's health.

Introduced to Dr Andrew Blackford's work in DNA damage and repair through a video competition, I organised a placement at his laboratory where I participated in experiments that investigated how conserved the BRCA1 gene is in different organisms. The techniques I used included gel electrophoresis, enabling me to determine whether the plasmids had successfully taken up the gene of interest. This inefficient method of gene splicing may be overridden by the recent development of CRISPR-Cas9 and intrigued by what this revolutionary tool offers, I read 'A Crack in Creation' by J. Doudna. It raised questions including the ethics of the genetic modification of human embryos and whether this may exacerbate prejudices against those who fall outside a narrow range of genetic norms.

During my work placement in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at UCLH, I witnessed an emergency caesarean delivery where I appreciated the surgical dexterity of the doctors and the importance of empathy when reassuring the anxious mother. Reading 'Birth Day' by M. Sloan, I became fascinated by the complexity of pregnancy and was made aware of the origins of the lithotomy position. I explored some of the insidious aspects of this position in labour in the American Journal of Nursing article 'Second Stage Labour - has tradition replaced safety?' It suggests that, to some extent, centuries of cultural tradition and convenience for doctors holds greater importance than maternal and foetal well-being. Many mothers resent the undignified position that affects their overall childbirth experience, and it was clear to me that patient autonomy had somehow been lost in the pursuit of practicality.

As a volunteer at a stroke unit, I learned of the challenges of caring for stroke victims, which are not limited to treating organic diseases but also part of their rehabilitation. Whilst befriending a stroke patient, I appreciated the positive effects of collaboration between different disciplines to provide high-quality patient care. At my GP placement, I observed how instead of the traditional paternalistic method, the doctor adopted a patient-centred approach. This was apparent when the GP adapted his language to explain to a patient the importance of long-term blood sugar control in the

management of his diabetes. I applied this method when explaining concepts to children as a volunteer classroom assistant for three years.

For my EPQ I researched the causes of obesity, such as defective leptin signalling and its relationship with cortisol, which challenge the belief that it is caused by a lack of willpower. To illustrate obesity beyond the literature, I completed work experience at Guy's Hospital where despite the nation's increasing waistline, the number of bariatric surgeries is static. This made me reflect on potential prejudice against overweight individuals within the NHS and barriers to their effective treatment. During a bariatric clinic, I listened to the frustration felt by many of the patients over their limited ability to perform basic tasks. I have been able to further develop my ability to empathise and listen as a volunteer at a Revitalise centre for people with a range of disabilities. At school, my role as House Captain has allowed me to become both an effective team member and leader. I have also combined my passion for baking and education by running classes for students and staff to raise money for local charities.

For me, medicine offers an opportunity to combine my scientific curiosity with the art of human interaction, and it is this that fuels my passion to study this dynamic discipline.

## **What do we think?**

Reading this as an admissions tutor, I would feel fully reassured; this statement portrays a rounded and highly prepared candidate who has considered their choice deeply and has had extensive academic and practical exposure to medicine. The detailed recounting of research and laboratory experiences, including the work with Dr. Andrew Blackford and the exploration of CRISPR-Cas9, showcases a strong commitment to scientific inquiry, especially suited to the Oxbridge medicine courses. Nevertheless, this commitment is also paired with exposure to clinical settings, which they describe in vivid detail. Stylistically, it could have been even stronger if the idea from the introduction was revisited in the conclusion. However, overall, this statement successfully achieves a difficult balancing act in portraying academic potential and interest, as well as vocational commitment and the broader personal attributes it requires.

## **Possible Interview Questions:**

- CRISPR Ethics: What are your views on the ethical implications of using CRISPR-Cas9 for human genetic modification?

- **Lithotomy Position:** How would you balance traditional practices with patient autonomy in obstetrics?
- **Stroke Care Collaboration:** Can you give an example of how multidisciplinary collaboration improved patient outcomes in stroke care?
- **Obesity Bias:** How should the NHS address biases against overweight individuals to ensure effective treatment?
- **Science and Patient Care:** How do you plan to integrate your scientific curiosity with patient care in your medical career?

### **Example Two – *Biological Natural Sciences, University of Cambridge***

My passion lies in understanding animals to improve their welfare. To be effective, improvements in this field must be based in science and I am keen to pursue a degree that gives me a thorough, scientific understanding of animals – their behaviour, physiology, and evolution – so that I can contribute effectively to improvements in animal wellbeing.

I am fascinated by animal behaviour, and particularly its implications for training. Having competed in equestrian teams internationally for 3 years, I began to question the logic and ethics of standard training techniques and researched learning theory. I used this knowledge to train a horse and experienced first-hand the welfare and performance benefits of basing animal training in science. I have subsequently used my growing knowledge, experience, and observational skills to train a feral horse. Neither of these training journeys has been straightforward and I have needed to find resilience, commitment and self-belief to progress in a field in which local expertise is scarce. I had to figure out and test potential solutions to each problem I encountered, evaluating the resultant behaviour against the behaviour I was aiming to achieve. My self-education was augmented by my EPQ in which I critically analysed various methods of training horses, and by a University of Edinburgh Animal Behaviour and Welfare course. These confirmed my belief that animal welfare should be led by research and solidified my goal of obtaining a thorough scientific training to bring academic rigour to this field.

My Biology A-level sparked an interest in how an organism's internal and external environments are related, and wider scientific reading has allowed me to deepen and apply this. For example, discovering how grooming by humans can reduce heart rate in several species led me to consider the potential applications of this in improving domesticated animal welfare. While Grandin's 'Animals in Translation' also gave me valuable insight into animals' perception of the world, the older ideas presented

occasionally conflicted with newer research, making me realise the value of critical, continued research. In addition, reading Vogel's 'Life's Devices' showed me the astonishing degree of specialisation in animals' anatomical traits, how this can benefit humans through biomimicry, and how mathematical modelling can be used to describe and understand biological processes. This aligns with my interest in maths, something that I would like to pursue alongside my biological studies. It also made me appreciate the value of a cross-disciplinary approach, something for which I hope my degree will equip me.

I enjoy academic challenge and have achieved success in the UKMT Senior Mathematics Challenge in Year 12 (silver award), the Cambridge Chemistry Challenge (gold award) and the RSC Chemistry Olympiad (silver award). These papers require the use of knowledge from different areas to solve contextual problems, a key skill for any scientist given that advances are often made at the intersection of disciplines.

Studying alongside my part-time job, caring for animals, and teaching has honed my self-discipline and time management. I have learnt to condense and convey ideas logically through tutoring GCSE maths as part of my DofE Gold award and teaching equine management for 4 years. During lockdown, I was part of a small team that created and delivered online equestrian learning programmes that are now being rolled out internationally. I will continue to teach these programmes in my gap year while gaining experience in rehabilitation and conservation at a marine sanctuary and using my knowledge of learning theory to train horses in Namibia.

We live in a world where scientific boundaries are being pushed at an incredible pace. With the application of emerging knowledge and a critical training of the mind from my degree, my ambition is to make a tangible difference to the lives of animals.

## **What do we think?**

The impression I'm left with about this applicant is that they have a genuine passion. They create this effect by being decisive and specific about what really interests them, rather than a blandly invoking multiple sciences. They lean their statement heavily to biology, and more specifically animal sciences, around which they have engaged deeply outside of their school curriculum. Cambridge admissions tutors are fully aware that many applicants will have specific interests in the sciences, though offer the broad Natural Sciences course deliberately so that undergraduates can try out several existing or new interests. They do evidence skills across several sciences by referencing Maths and Chemistry competitions,

and refer to mathematical modelling, but I would advise this candidate to use the additional Cambridge-specific personal statement to further emphasise their interest in the interdisciplinary nature of the course.

### **Possible Interviews Questions:**

- **Training Techniques:** How did your research on learning theory change your approach to training horses?
- **EPQ Findings:** What were the key conclusions from your EPQ on horse training methods, and what further experiment/study might you want to conduct on this?
- **Grooming Research:** How can the findings on grooming reducing heart rate be applied to improve the welfare of domesticated animals?
- **Cross-Disciplinary Approach:** How do you see mathematical modelling contributing to your studies and future work in animal welfare?
- **Future Goals:** How do you plan to use your degree to make a difference in animal welfare?

### **Example Three – Chemistry, University of Oxford**

It was during my work experience at the Jodrell Laboratory in Kew Gardens that confirmed Chemistry was definitely the right course for me. While I was watching the scientist replacing the liquid helium at the centre of the NMR machine, he explained the detailed 3D mapping of organic molecules that can be obtained from NMR analysis. It was fascinating to learn about an area of analytical Chemistry that I had never even heard of, and being able to see the results was even better. I have since discovered that NMR analysis is useful in all branches of chemical research and I am looking forward to learning at University exactly how this is. The quest for more answers in areas I have comparatively only touched on at school drives my enthusiasm to pursue Chemistry at a higher level.

I am particularly interested in and challenged by the application of Chemistry in everyday life whether it is in perfumes or bullet proof jackets. Working on my extended essay, on the feasibility of substituting bio-fuels for petrol and diesel, I gained a better understanding of the chemistry involved by reading such books as Organic Chemistry by Finar and Principles of Organic Chemistry by Geissman. I was also able to present a

more reasoned argument by taking into account the political, economic and ethical issues; matters which chemists and scientists face in their research.

I take part and am on the committee for the school's 'Science in the Community' society. This is an initiative set up to encourage primary school children to study science through to higher education. We do this principally by conducting exciting, interesting and sometimes explosive demonstrations, like the oxidation of a jelly baby and igniting hydrogen balloons, which they will not have seen in a primary school classroom. It is such demonstrations as these that developed my own fascination with Chemistry and I take great pleasure in sharing my enthusiasm and passion for the subject with the pupils.

I play sport to a high level, being captain of the water polo team, a member of the 1st XV rugby team, a GB trialist and a member of a national winning rowing VIII culminating in an appearance at Henley Royal Regatta, all of which have instilled in me transferable teamwork skills. I have been a key organisational member of 'Make a Difference Day', where we successfully promoted and implemented fair trade products at school, and I developed my leadership, communication and organisational skills.

I would like to study for a Chemistry degree as it will challenge me intellectually, and I realise that I have only scratched the surface of the subject. After my undergraduate degree I intend to continue to complete a PhD, as I enjoy both the theoretical and experimental sides of Chemistry and find the idea of branching out and investigating an unknown field of the subject a stimulating prospect.

## What do we think?

This statement shows the importance of a strong introduction. In the first few lines, this candidate satisfies admissions tutors' key questions on motivation, evidence, and suitability. Through their work experience, they have learned what research in chemistry involves, and have demonstrated strong undergraduate potential by conducting super-curricular research on a new topic. The second half of the statement is less effective, veering away from the academic content relevant at university level, and spending too much time on extra-curriculars. Moreover, there are some errors in English usage in the statement, such as capitalising 'chemistry' and 'university' when they shouldn't be capitalised, and some of the phrasing could be improved and made more concise (e.g. '...it is such demonstrations as these...' is slightly clunky). Though this statement could do with polishing, the effectiveness of the first half of the statement carries it a long way,



and a strong supporting reference and accompanying grades will have secured this candidate an interview.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **NMR Fascination:** What aspects of NMR analysis did you find most intriguing during your work experience, and how do you see it applying to future chemical research?
- **Biofuels Extended Essay:** What were the main findings of your extended essay on biofuels, and how did you integrate political, economic, and ethical considerations into your research?
- **Science in the Community:** How has your involvement in the 'Science in the Community' society influenced your approach to studying chemistry?
- **Sports and Teamwork:** How do you think teamwork skills – such as those gained through sports – would contribute to your skills as a prospective chemistry student?
- **Future Research Goals:** What specific areas of chemistry are you most excited to focus on in your undergraduate and potential PhD studies?



*Christ Church Oxford University,  
The Meadow Building*



### **Example Four – Experimental Psychology, Oxford**

It is fascinating to me how much is still unknown about the mind and behaviour. I was initially drawn to Psychology after attending a Gifted and Talented lecture examining both Savant Syndrome and the curious traits resulting from hemineglect. It revealed to me how, through scientific research, Psychology can help to understand the human condition.

I have always enjoyed tackling new problems in the logical and scientific way that is employed in psychological research. Mathematics and Biology have shown me the importance of statistical analysis in drawing scientific conclusions. Psychology has introduced me to research methods and helped me to discipline my interpretation and evaluation of studies, whilst studying English Literature has enabled me to structure my ideas more clearly and concisely. My ability to analyse, debate and respond to problems is demonstrated by the award I received for 'Original and Effective Resolution' at the Model United Nations Conference.

During my experience at Maudsley International, I was fascinated by work being done by leading clinicians to improve global mental health. Learning about the prejudiced attitudes in many countries, it occurred to me that developments in mapping and understanding the brain might be crucial in reducing the stigma of mental illness. Volunteering for Autism Anglia combines the rewarding task of helping the charity to disseminate research with my growing interest in explanations of autism, such as a deficit of mirror neurons.

This experience and my continuous search for academic challenge led me to do an EPQ investigating whether mirror neurons are the key to empathy. I have read and evaluated research papers including Carr (2003) and books such as 'Mirroring people' (Iacoboni, 2008) which have heightened my respect for how experimental design and new technology can unlock abstract ideas and emotions. Realising that most of this research focused on cognitive empathy, led me to speculate whether the imagination plays a role in stimulating mirror neurons in the case of abstract empathy.

Oxford University's UNIQ summer school gave me valuable insight into undergraduate study of Psychology. Seminars ranging from 'Cognition Caught in Two Minds' to 'Intergroup Conflict' reflected my interest in both brain mechanisms and social behaviour. A lecture on consciousness by Marcus du Sautoy demonstrated how different psychological approaches can complement each other and, by working on different levels, serve to broaden our understanding of complex human behaviour. Reading 'Thinking Fast and Slow' (Kahneman, 2011) and 'Impulse' (Lewis, 2013), I was intrigued by how the brain's need for efficiency leaves it fallible and prone to errors,

such as subliminal influences and stereotyping. They also highlight the enthralling idea of how much or how little control we have over our own behaviour, which in my opinion runs throughout Psychology.

My competitive nature has pushed me to play sport at county level and reach the National finals in athletics, indoor and outdoor hockey. I became the Suffolk 800m champion in 2010 and have captained multiple sports teams. Through coaching netball and tennis and more recently as a biology mentor, I have learnt to communicate effectively and motivate others. In school and with theatre groups I have played lead roles in productions and have recently achieved distinctions in grade 7 speech and drama and grade 5 musical theatre.

I have always managed my time effectively allowing me to maintain a healthy work-social balance and I am eager to continue to do so at university. I am excited at the prospect of academic study with like-minded peers in the challenging and dynamic field of Psychology.

## What do we think?

This statement is clear and easy-to-digest for an admissions tutor reading at pace. Some areas of the statement veer towards the generic, and more specific use of language and examples would help to make the statement more vivid and memorable, particular in the introduction and conclusion - 'I have always', for example, is a heavily overused phrase. Moreover, the statement contains the common mistake of mis-capitalising the subject title (i.e. psychology does not need a capital letter in most circumstances), and there are a couple other small errors (such as not capitalising the name or using a space in this reference: '(Iacoboni,2008)') - these are easily preventable distractions. The shining strength of this statement, however, is in the quality and quantity of independent, critical thinking, where the candidate shows they have not only engaged with psychology materials beyond their syllabus, but also have something to say about them. This aspect is more important than flair or polish and is sadly often missing from otherwise exceptional statements.

## Possible Interview Questions:

- Savant Syndrome and Hemineglect: You mention Savant Syndrome and hemineglect in relation to the human condition; do you think these kinds of

conditions should be considered as ‘abnormal’ to the human condition or part of it?

- **Statistical Analysis in Psychology:** Should we always consider statistics when conducting psychological research?
- **Mirror Neurons and Empathy:** What were the key findings of your EPQ on mirror neurons and empathy, and how did they influence your perspective on cognitive versus abstract empathy?
- **Global Mental Health:** How did your experience at Maudsley International shape your views on the role of psychological research in addressing mental health stigma worldwide?
- **Psychological Fallibility:** What lessons could policy-makers take from "Thinking Fast and Slow"?

### **Example Five – Biochemistry, University of Oxford**

I believe the genius of nature lies in the unseen world of the very small, where molecules and cells are the architects of life. For me, the inspirational quality of biochemistry derives from its ability to explain the intricate myriad of processes that occur at a molecular and cellular level, because, through understanding these, one can begin to understand what it truly means to be alive, as well as being able to harness this knowledge for the advancement of humankind in fields as diverse as medicine, industry and agriculture. It is not just the logical problem-solving aspect of biochemistry that appeals to me, but also the philosophical and ethical dimension of science.

To increase my understanding of biochemistry, I have taken responsibility for and actively engaged in my learning beyond of the constraints of the A-level syllabus. My EPQ gave me an opportunity to research independently at an undergraduate level in a field that interested me. I chose to study metabolic pathways because since learning about cells, it has captured my interest as to how cells maintain their function and internal equilibrium using thousands of highly regulated and interdependent biochemical pathways. The project opened my eyes as to the extent to which the cycling of 'energy' is a central theme in biochemistry. I am an avid reader, and I am always keen to explore biochemistry by reading books, journals and internet articles. I especially enjoyed the book 'How we live and why we die' by Lewis Wolpert as it brought together all the main principles of cell biology and added a philosophical element regarding the origin and purpose of life, as well as whether humans should use stem

cells for research. I have made a habit of regularly reading New Scientist magazine and the websites of Max Planck Institutes; with regards to the latter, I believe that my bilingualism has and will be invaluable in the sense that I have an insight into a different culture as well as the ability to read papers written only in German. I found several studies from Max Planck Institutes particularly interesting, such as the creation of synthetic proteins by the integration of artificial amino acids. I have attended several lectures, such as one on cell cycle control at Imperial College by Sir Paul Nurse.

However, in my view science is not simply reading what has already been discovered: it is the art of research and discovery. This is why I took the initiative to organise a Nuffield Bursary work experience placement at King's College London, in which I investigated a method of determining co-receptor usage of HIV and how this could be related to disease progression. The work touched upon key principles and techniques of molecular biology, genetics, and biochemical analysis, while also giving me the opportunity to use bioinformatics for the first time. The experience has greatly increased my lab skills and gave me the opportunity of writing a proper scientific paper (which has led to a Gold CREST award). But above all, it enlightened me as to the process of applying scientific knowledge and procedures to solve real-world problems.

A highlight of the past year has been the Young Enterprise Company Programme, in which the company I was part of reached the area finals and won the best product award for our iPhone application for GCSE science and maths revision. In my role as project manager of the company, I learnt a great deal about management and teamwork, as well as presenting in front of a large audience. My involvement in the Tiffin School debating society has certainly helped me gain a great deal of confidence, especially when I was selected to represent my school in the prestigious Oxford School's Debating Championship. I am also a keen sportsman; I represent my school for tennis and cross country running and I am captain of the under 18 tennis team at my club. I am already involved in regular coaching and planning to take a full tennis coaching qualification.

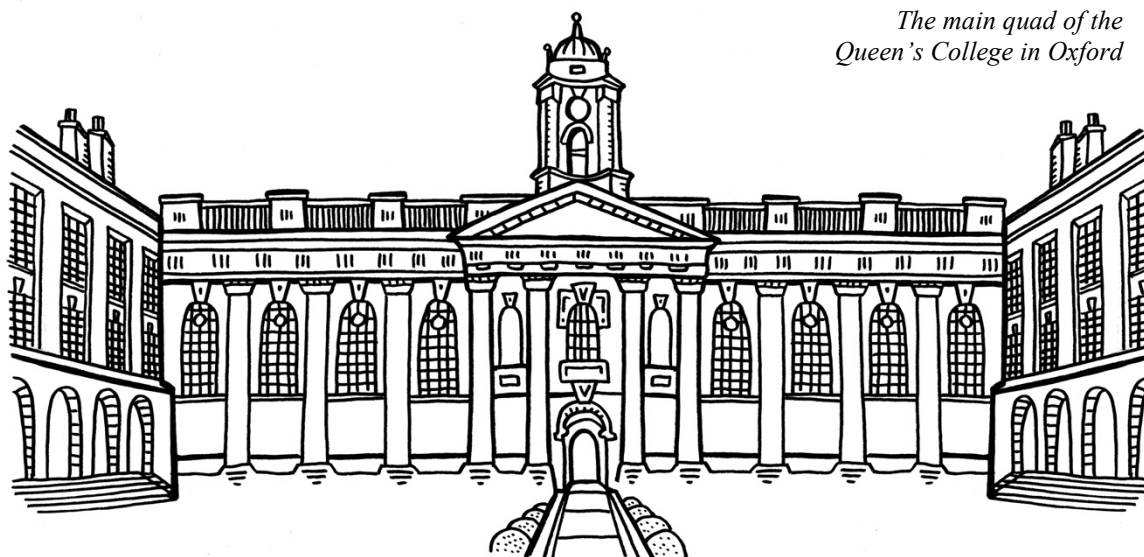
## **What do we think?**

This statement holds the interest of the reader by using thoughtful and specific language to articulate their interest in biochemistry. They also have a good balance of content, with much of their statement focused on super-curricular engagement with the subject (i.e. relevant, academic, and beyond their school syllabus). Where the statement could be improved is in varying the sentence structures, as many begin with 'I have...', 'I enjoy...', which can hamper the flow of the statement and

begin to come across as a list rather than a cohesive document. Similarly, the larger central paragraph would benefit from being cut in half, with a clearer focus for each section. Nevertheless, the quality and extent of this candidate's super-curricular engagement with biochemistry – both through reading and practical experiences – is typical of an Oxbridge offer-holder in the medical and life sciences.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Metabolic Pathways:** What specific aspects of metabolic pathways did you find most intriguing during your Extended Project, and how do they illustrate the importance of energy cycling in biochemistry?
- **Philosophical Elements:** How did "How We Live and Why We Die" influence your views on the philosophical and ethical dimensions of biochemistry, particularly regarding stem cell research?
- **Nuffield Bursary Experience:** Can you explain the method you investigated for determining HIV co-receptor usage and its implications for understanding disease progression?
- **Academic Enrichment:** How has your bilingualism enhanced your understanding and engagement with biochemistry? Do you think different languages are better suited to conducting science?
- **Research and Discovery:** How did your Nuffield Bursary placement change your understanding of applying scientific knowledge to real-world problems?



*The main quad of the  
Queen's College in Oxford*

# Physical and Mathematical Sciences

## Example One – *Engineering, University of Cambridge*

Little did I know at the age of seven, when I was creating imaginative cars and rockets with LEGO, my lifelong curiosity for how things worked would lead me to the desire to be an engineer.

To further my interest, I helped research, build and test a weather balloon as part of STEM society at school. On top of leading the team, I was responsible for the Raspberry Pi flight computer which transmitted live images and data from 32km into the atmosphere. This taught me the importance of teamwork and how every individual has a key role in making any project a success. It also emphasised how communication is fundamental in group dynamics, and how to assign roles depending on each individual's strengths. Alongside this, I set up the school's National Cipher Challenge team which involved me pitching my idea to senior staff, creating a term plan and delivering each session.

What inspires me most about engineering is the opportunity to bring about change and enhance people's lives, so I took the initiative of writing an article about the weather balloon, which was published in The Scientific Student.

Having read Matt Parker's "Things To Make And Do In The Fourth Dimension" I met the author to discuss ideas on solving conjectures about colouring in a torus and how this could be applied in an engineering context, for example labelling parts of a rocket design to simplify identification of vital structures. I sought the opportunity to work with Matt at the Manchester Science Festival where we replicated how a computer would display an image using only pens and sheets of plastic, colouring in over 8000 individual pixels over the course of a week. This allowed me to share my enthusiasm for engineering with members of the public and emphasised the importance of being able to translate technical detail in a user-friendly way.

To enhance my knowledge of engineering, I have attended IoP lectures and taster days at leading universities; topics included the works at CERN, LIGOS, and the energy crisis. This further convinced me how engineering is at the forefront of technological advancements that continue to benefit the world and unlock the secrets of the universe. It also led me to read "The Elegant Universe" by Brian Greene, which showed



how fundamental engineering is to all scientific developments, such as the Greenwich telescope in proving Einstein’s general relativity.

My work experience with Atkins involved spending time with different engineering disciplines, including electrical, civil, and mechanical. This taught me key components of an engineering project, from pinpointing the initial problem to delivering the final solution, and led me to appreciate the different stages of engineering. The most interesting part of my work experience was shadowing a team who designed a level crossing system, and then built that system on site to test it.

In school, I mentor younger students and I am also the Charity Captain, which involves in creating and organising imaginative ways to raise funds. This has given me the opportunity engage with the wider community outside of school, such as organising events for our local charity, and raising money for our partner school in Tanzania.

Rowing three times a week with school shows my resilience and dedication towards my interests. Furthermore, nine years of Taekwondo has taught me core values of courtesy, integrity, perseverance and self-control. My creativeness is shown by my darkroom photography, which has led to my work being displayed in a Birmingham Art gallery.

My desire to understand how things work and how they are made is why engineering attracts me. I look forward to experiencing one of the most cutting edge and fastest developing industries in the world to learn how to transform scientific discoveries into useful and exciting new products.

## What do we think?

Engineering personal statements are typically filled with practical experiences and group projects. This statement shows how powerful it is when a student highlights what “I” did within a team and explains, in vivid detail, the impact they had on the project. The student communicates their commitment to engineering using the technique of “springboarding”: they start exploring a topic through a resource such as Parker’s book, and then proactively follow that trail by pursuing associated experiences related to the topic. All the examples that the student uses as evidence of their love of engineering have meaningful details and explanations attached to them. By showcasing what they learnt during a specific experience, the student *shows* the reader, rather than *tells*, how deep their engagement is with their subject.

There are a few of moments in this statement that could be subject to a finer stylistic edit; for example, there are a couple of relatively long sentences which limit speedy comprehension. Whilst scrutinising these areas would be important in other academic disciplines, the Engineer's priorities are to portray the depth of their academic experiences, showcase areas of expertise, and be as engaging as possible. This statement does that brilliantly.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Weather Balloon Project:** What engineering challenges did you encounter while integrating the Raspberry Pi flight computer for real-time data transmission at high altitudes?
- **Colouring Conjectures and Engineering:** How did your exploration of colouring conjectures with Matt Parker inform your understanding of labelling and identification systems in complex engineering projects, such as rocket design?
- **Scientific Advancements in Engineering:** How did attending IoP lectures on CERN, LIGOS, and the energy crisis, along with reading "The Elegant Universe," shape your views on the intersection of engineering and cutting-edge scientific research?
- **Level Crossing System Design:** Describe the engineering principles and problem-solving strategies you observed while shadowing the team that designed and tested the level crossing system at Atkins.
- **Leadership in STEM Projects:** Tell me more about your experience leading the STEM society's weather balloon project and the National Cipher Challenge team.

### **Example Two – Computer Science, University of Cambridge**

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Computer Science is the ability to comprise revolutionary programs from zeros and ones. My curiosity for how machines operate and a love for solving logical problems sparked my interest in the field of computing and has led to the goal of studying the subject at a higher level.

With an inquisitive mind comes a desire to obtain knowledge in everything that I do. I strive to solve challenging problems and better my understanding, obtaining a sense of academic fulfillment when answering questions leads to more arising. I was placed



within the top 120 students in the Senior Physics Challenge, and have competed in competitions such as the UKMT, Maths Olympiad and Bebras Challenge. These have allowed me to apply my classroom knowledge in a stimulating way while enhancing my ability to think innovatively, creatively and logically.

As computers continue to permeate human society, cyber security is becoming an evermore prominent issue. On a CyberFirst Advanced course, I undertook research into elliptical curve cryptography and the trapdoor algorithm behind it. This taught me about the significance of mathematics in computing, whilst allowing me to discover a real-life application of the logarithmic concepts I have learnt during my A levels. This fascination with cryptosystems, along with an ambition to deepen my understanding, led me to write an essay on the elliptic curve discrete logarithm function. I presented my research to a cohort of A level students, harnessing the advice that I was given after my presentation at a Summer School. I spoke on the complications of programming driverless cars to react to ethical decisions, with The Moral Machine Experiment demonstrating unanimous livelihood values across the globe.

In my spare time, I relish the chance to speak at events as it allows me to influence others' opinions and have mine developed in the process. Holding the position of Head Girl at my Sixth Form has enabled me to organise and speak in assemblies as well as host my school's annual awards evening, which have helped me to gain invaluable interpersonal skills. Effective teamwork is a critical aspect of the role; I always make a conscious effort to consider what is best for everyone whilst effectively managing time and keeping calm under pressure. I pride myself on my organisational skills and strive to be efficient, often turning to spreadsheets and Gantt charts to optimise my time. Whilst on a work placement at Aviva, I witnessed teamwork and effective communication forming the foundations for successful software development within a scrum team. I got the opportunity to help build part of their website, which helped me to expand upon my self-taught knowledge of HTML.

Studying Mathematics and Further Decision has given me an insight into how optimal solutions can be found through logical algorithms. In my Year 13 programming project, I created an interactive educational program for Kruskal's algorithm aimed at Further Mathematics students. Programming an algorithm that I had previously only performed on paper was enthralling and the experience led me to discover techniques such as source control that have helped me to become more efficient.

I am inspired by the works of Pooja Chandrashekar, who proved that neither age nor gender should be a barrier to an education in Computer Science by founding ProjectCSGirls in her high school years. I therefore orchestrated and supported two teams entering the Year 8 CyberFirst girls' competition, as well as assisting the

teaching of three lower-year classes. These activities have allowed me to work towards my aim of instilling a love for Mathematics and Computing in students.

Upon attending a Wikipedia Edit-A-Thon at Cambridge University, I was made aware of the inequality in the availability of people's achievements in the STEM industry. This has led to the ongoing endeavour of updating and creating Wikipedia pages for the underrepresented scientists on the platform. Without a diverse range of role models being depicted, students may feel that they are not represented in an industry, which could lead to talent going unfilled in the STEM space.

I am excited at the prospect of studying Computer Science at a higher level: I seek to better my understanding of computer architecture and to fuel my fascination for programming. I strive to play a part in this dynamic industry, having an ambition to work at the forefront of computing revolutions at Googleplex.

## What do we think?

If I were to take the metaphorical red pen to this statement, I would shave off a few characters, to make better use of the 4000-character limit, in sections such as start of the second paragraph. Sentences like that are descriptive and are claims which can be made by anyone. It's much better to demonstrate the quality of one's academic curiosity by showing it off via a description of a favourite topic. I would also limit the paragraph on experiences as Head Girl. I appreciate some of the points made here but an Oxbridge personal statement should prioritise academic content. The student orders their experiences well: starting with impressive achievements and sophisticated research experiences. The best super-curricular experiences are those which closely resemble the experiences one would expect from undergraduate study in that field; i.e. the use of peer-reviewed journals or advanced textbooks to further understanding. I would encourage this student to be more specific about their research to show off the depth they achieved. Overall, this is an earnest representation of this student's commitment and shows academic curiosity.

## Potential Interview Questions:

- Elliptic Curve Cryptography: Can you explain the mathematical principles behind elliptic curve cryptography and how the trapdoor algorithm functions?

- **Ethical Decisions in Programming:** How did your research on the Moral Machine Experiment inform your views on programming ethical decision-making in driverless cars?
- **CyberFirst Advanced Course:** What specific insights did you gain about the role of mathematics in computing from your CyberFirst Advanced course?
- **Kruskal’s Algorithm Project:** How did creating an interactive educational program for Kruskal’s algorithm deepen your understanding of both the algorithm and programming techniques like source control?
- **Role Models in STEM:** How has your involvement in updating Wikipedia pages for underrepresented scientists influenced your perspective on diversity and representation in the STEM fields?

### ***Example Three – Mathematics, University of Oxford***

Mathematics is not only the most interesting and relevant subject for me, but also one that has fascinated me since a very early age. Initially, the pleasure came from the analysis of problems, application of a theorem and the understanding that this theorem will generate the correct solution consistently. As my studies have continued I have learnt to appreciate that there is a lot more to mathematics. Pure mathematics can be stimulating and challenging and we can use these seemingly abstract tools in real situations and combined with applied mathematics can literally change the world. As technology has improved the importance of mathematics to industry and commerce has continued to grow. Applications range from predicting the effect of global economic changes on the stock markets of the world to using encryption to provide security for internet purchases.

Ever since encountering mathematical proofs I have enjoyed using them because they are absolute, and therefore, enduring and can be used by subsequent mathematicians to continue to advance the boundaries of mathematical knowledge. Due to this interest in proofs I decided to read Singh’s “Fermat’s Last Theorem”. I was fascinated by the way in which the book focused on one puzzle, but showed how generations of mathematicians and many different mathematical techniques were needed to solve the puzzle. I particularly liked the sections on the ancient mathematicians like the Pythagorean Brotherhood, because even with a fraction of the equipment and knowledge we have today they were still able to create proofs, such as Pythagoras’ Theorem, which had practical applications in construction at that time and is still used

today. I also liked their example of mathematical proof with the chessboard and dominoes because, like many proofs, it is easy to comprehend and satisfying once understood.

My love of mathematics took me to two taster courses in London, as well as the mathematics open day at Oxford. One of the talks was on transcendental numbers, such as  $e$  and  $\pi$ , which fascinated me because they were numbers that could not be obtained through non-zero polynomial equations with rational coefficients. Another talk was on Ramsey numbers and although I could not understand all of it, I still found the basic principle amazing. I especially enjoyed the talk on applied mathematics and in particular the demonstration that involved tea leaves in a bowl of water which encouraged me to read “1089 and all that” as it was written by the presenter of the talk, Dr D. Acheson.

My fascination for mathematics has resulted in school prizes and a Gold certificate in the mathematics challenge. I believe that my results in physics and economics also reflect my aptitude passion for maths because both physics and economics are mathematical based subjects.

Time management is a skill that I have developed to handle a demanding academic schedule alongside a range of extra-curricular activities. I was finance director for a Young Enterprise team and obtained an OCR Level 2 Certificate in Enterprise. This role involved many practical applications of mathematical techniques including data analysis to determine the popularity of products and their relative costs allowing us to calculate the optimum selling price to maximize company profitability. This year I was appointed to the position of senior prefect and I am also a member of the school’s first eleven football team for which I was awarded house colours. Outside of school my main interest is sport and I have captained my local club football team since I was nine years old and play tennis socially. The experience gained from sport and from the positions of responsibility that I have held at school has taught me how to work in a team and to continue to seek improvements in my performance. Such lessons are equally applicable to my academic work, where I am always striving to do better.

## **What do we think?**

Mentioning “Fermat’s Last Theorem” by Simon Singh will definitely win in a game of personal statement bingo, so it’s therefore prudent to seek out more original references. That being said, this statement discusses the book in a way which is meaningful, interesting, and adds value to the statement. This student has offered

up details of their learning which an admissions tutor could choose to ask them about. They have also proved that they actually read the book, by describing what they found interesting and what they learnt. It is also refreshing, in the reference to Ramsey numbers, that the student is honest about what they learnt and also what they don't yet understand. This is obviously to be expected at this stage in their academic career and I believe that this kind of transparency (when used appropriately) builds a rapport with the admissions tutor in absentia.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Mathematical Proofs:** What elements of "Fermat's Last Theorem" by Simon Singh captivated you, and how have they influenced your appreciation of proofs?
- **Transcendental Numbers:** Can you explain why transcendental numbers, such as  $e$  and  $\pi$ , fascinated you and what their significance is in mathematics?
- **Ramsey Numbers:** What did you find intriguing about Ramsey numbers during the mathematics open day at Oxford?
- **Applied Mathematics:** How did the demonstration involving tea leaves in a bowl of water at the mathematics talk enhance your understanding of applied mathematics?
- **Practical Applications:** How did your role as finance director for the Young Enterprise team apply mathematical techniques, and what did you learn about the practical uses of mathematics in this context?

### **Example Four – Physics, University of Oxford**

What really inspired me to study physics was reading lectures and memoirs by Richard Feynman. His 'Six not so Easy Pieces' is brilliant in presenting complex concepts, especially relativity, in manageable ways. However there are many topics of physics which interest me. After reading 'Quantum Physics A Beginner's Guide' By 'Alistair Rae', the topic of superconductivity captivated me. The idea of an absolute zero value for resistance in a wire was new to me and I was encouraged to read more into it. However after reading 'QED: The Strange Theory of Light' I was motivated to study quantum

theory, and have since found it the most captivating of the physics topics I have studied. The disregard for general logic amazed me and the new style of thinking appealed to me.

During the last school year, I have enjoyed learning the Maths courses. I took great pleasure learning the mechanics modules and then being able to apply the knowledge to problems faced in physics. Subsequently I sought to improve my knowledge on mechanics and was led back to the Feynman Lectures, which included information on vectors and relativity that encapsulated me. I particularly found the changes to Newtonian laws to account for changing mass when in motion most remarkable.

Predating this I achieved 1 Silver and 2 Gold UK intermediate Maths Challenge Awards. After doing this challenge for the first time, I enjoyed learning the new methods required for solving these problems for the following years. The constant search for new methods to solve old problems is one of the reasons I am interested in studying Physics. One example which took my imagination was the Michelson-Morley experiment to detect aether flow, and the following attempt by Lorentz to explain the null result of the experiment with the Length contraction theory.

I love experiments, which is why I chose Physics over Maths. In the summer of 2008 I secured a place as a lab assistant at the National Physical Laboratory where I performed research into electromagnetism. More specifically I was exploring the impact to the uniformity of a magnetic field over single layered solenoid or 25cm, when introducing a small defect on the bindings. The defect I explored was a break in the bindings to allow a probe to enter the centre of the solenoid to measure the change of a material that would be placed in the magnetic field at a later point. I found that the break, although only 1mm wide, caused the magnetic field to vary too significantly to allow the solenoid to be used to measure more materials in future. Following this I designed and carried out my own large public experiment to test and demonstrate certain properties of Newtonian fluids. I was able to set up a pool of custard to test and demonstrate these properties, the focus being to find the proportion of water to cornflour required to create a dilatant fluid able to support a human running across it.

My extended project qualification involved choosing a topic to research. After attending a lecture at the Cavendish Physics centre Cambridge about electric cars, I immediately knew that I wanted to perform my project on wireless energy transfer. In my project I attempted to explore methods for short range energy transfer.

I have developed my leadership and team skills by participating in The Royal Naval Engineering Challenge for two successive years. In both these years, under my

leadership, my team reached the finals. As well as this, I was an active member of the lower sixth form committee for my school, which involved duties including fundraising for charity in which we organised an Easter egg sale for Local Hospice.

The practical aspects of Physics are what excite me. One such experiment that has caught my attention is the exploration into ferromagnetism. I have independently designed and carried out experiments during my school years and look forward to doing so at university.

### **What do we think?**

This student utilises the “springboard” method to describe their journey through a series of books. This is great and demonstrates proactivity and an ability to learn independently. I would push this student to pause in the opening paragraph and strive for greater depth. The most memorable aspects of a student’s personal statement are the academic details that they choose as representatives of their passion. Students can dwell on niche aspects of a subject, knowing that these sections will pique an academic’s interest. A good example of this student’s academic engagement is in the reference to their experiences at the National Physical Laboratory. Overall, this statement is wonderfully clear and easy for an admissions tutor to quickly comprehend.

### **Possible Interview Questions for this Candidate:**

- **Feynman’s Influence:** How did Feynman's "Six Not So Easy Pieces" and "QED" shape your understanding of relativity and quantum theory?
- **Superconductivity Interest:** What intrigued you most about superconductivity in "Quantum Physics: A Beginner’s Guide," and how has it influenced your view on physics applications?
- **Mechanics and Relativity:** How did studying mechanics in Maths enhance your understanding of physics, especially Newtonian laws and changing mass in motion?
- **Lab Experience at NPL:** What were the key challenges and lessons from your research on electromagnetism and magnetic fields at the National Physical Laboratory?
- **Project Outcomes:** What most surprised you about the outcomes of your extended project qualification?



### ***Example Five – Physical Natural Sciences, University of Cambridge***

Exploring the Universe through the medium of science has always captivated me. It is exciting to predict the behaviour of objects, people, machines and chemicals using equations and ideas. I consider science to be a skill, about testing hypothesis and conducting experiments as much as learning facts and reciting definitions. I love the constantly evolving nature of science, the knowledge that all the theories I use, and any theory I ever develop, are only as good as the data that they were developed from. This imperfection draws me to the subject as I know the work will never be done, and there will always be more theories to be discovered.

When I studied in China, my interest in science was restrained by the over exam-oriented education system, for it has never been school-based or curriculum-led. I believe this broad interest has given me the motivation to achieve success in various competitions. I won a Silver Medal in the British Physics Olympiad in my lower VI year. On the chemistry side, I won a Roentgenium Award in the Cambridge Chemistry Challenge for Lower VI competition, and was invited to take a two day course with twenty top chemists in St. Catherine's College in Cambridge. Gaining such enjoyment from, and being successful in, both physics and chemistry has guided my interest to the interface between chemistry and physics. This summer I spent a month at Zotefoams plc, a company making advanced polymer foams. I worked for the Director of Research, on a project testing the effect of radiation on the foams. They use gamma ray or electron beam to irradiate the straight-chain polymer to achieve such a level of cross-linking that it is still possible to mould the foams, but they have much better physical strength and thermal stability. I researched mainly on PVDF foams, whose properties could be influenced by a variety of factors including the level of irradiation, the gassing process and the purity of the raw materials. I focused on the effect of irradiation and found some of the properties, like response to compression stress, are nearly solely influenced by irradiation, while others, such as maximum tensile stress seem to be influenced by multiple factors.

Among my readings, I find NMR spectroscopy particularly interesting. I've read "Nuclear Magnetic Resonance" by David AR Williams and "Modern NMR Spectroscopy- A Work Book of Chemical Problems" by Jeremy KM Sanders FRS, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the topic. As a subject it really does lie on the borderline of physics and chemistry, using the physics of magnetic fields to ascertain the structure of molecules. I find it incredible that concepts as abstract as energy levels and spin can be used to comprehend something as real and concrete as the structures of molecules. I'm now reading "Understanding NMR Spectroscopy" by James Keeler to develop a mathematical understanding of the topic.



I believe my mathematical ability assists in providing a stable ground for my study in the scientific field. In my lower sixth year, I came top in my year and third in the whole school in the Senior Maths Challenge and afterwards got Grade 1 in STEP 1. This mathematical background is helpful in understanding more complex theories and systems more readily.

While my academic passions are science and mathematics, I have always seen these within a wider human context and studied philosophy and theology in my lower sixth year - which I still enjoy discussing with other students and teachers. Philosophy helps me reach a deeper understanding of science. After all, science is about the world, not merely calculations. For me, science is about enjoying the process of understanding the world. However, it is more than that. It helps us develop the technology that enhances and extends our lives. I cannot think of anything more worthwhile, a subject that keeps me challenged whilst making the world a better place.

## What do we think?

This student commences their statement with a short “love letter to the subject”. Whilst it isn’t recommended to spend too many characters doing this, expressing one’s appreciation for and perspective on an academic discipline is a good way to begin. The student proves how much they engaged with their work experience at Zotefoams by detailing what they learnt. There is sufficient academic fodder in this section for an admissions tutor to spark a conversation. To enhance it further I would recommend that the student “springboards” from the work experience to some additional reading or research on this topic. This student achieves many things through this personal statement: they showcase their impressive achievements, demonstrate the depth of their engagement with their subject, and convince the reader of their passion.

## Possible Interview Questions:

- Radiation Effects on Polymers: What did your research at Zotefoams reveal about how irradiation affects the properties of PVDF foams, and what implications might this have for their practical applications?
- NMR Spectroscopy: How do the principles of NMR spectroscopy, as explored in your readings, illustrate the intersection of physics and chemistry, and why do you find this technique particularly compelling?

- **Mathematical Foundations:** How has your success in the Senior Maths Challenge and STEP helped you understand and approach complex scientific theories?
- **Science and Philosophy:** How has studying philosophy alongside your scientific subjects deepened your understanding of scientific principles and their broader implications?
- **Evolving Nature of Science:** How does the ever-changing nature of scientific theories and data motivate you in your pursuit of knowledge and research in physical natural sciences?

# Social Sciences

## ***Example One – Human, Social, and Political Sciences, University of Cambridge***

Democratic progress across the world appears to be grinding to a halt. The legitimacy of Russian elections is increasingly questioned. Former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has criticised Medvedev and Putin, stating that they are ‘doing everything they can to move away from democracy, to stay in power’. Moreover, the attempts of both the US and the EU to promote democracy in the Middle East have met with little success. The State builders of post-Hussein Iraq seemed to believe that the imposition of democracy would be enough. However, thousands are currently fleeing persecution from Islamic State, which Noam Chomsky has described as ‘one of the results of the US hitting a very vulnerable society with a sledgehammer’. China seems to offer an alternative, non-democratic model for progress; whilst human rights violations have been extensively documented across the country, it is rapidly becoming one of the world’s largest economies.

Perhaps the success of a state depends on more than democracy alone. Machiavelli talked about the importance of strong leadership; he believed that courage and intellect were vital qualities for a prince to have. Jonathan Powell argues that his ideas remain relevant and are demonstrated by ‘the ability to take difficult decisions and to resist the politician’s natural desire to pander to powerful constituencies’. I enjoy debating the modern-day relevance of political writers and have been fortunate to engage with many other political issues and ideas through my school’s debating programme. In Slovenia, I had the opportunity to debate against students from a variety of countries, on topics including whether US military intervention is a greater threat than Islamic fundamentalism. Throughout, I noted the contrasting worldviews among competitors from the US and the Middle East. I have also debated in the House of Lords and submitted evidence to the Arctic Committee, regarding the economic and environmental future of the region. Seeing the Upper House at first hand enabled me to gain a deeper insight into the functioning of UK Parliament. Recently, I was awarded a distinction for my ESB Level 3 in Spoken English, in which I discussed whether the UK should leave the EU.

I am an Academic Scholar at my school and winner of its 2015 prize for Outstanding Academic Achievement. In English A-Level, I have enjoyed exploring political dimensions in literature, in works such as Arthur Miller’s ‘The Crucible’. Studying Spanish has also had a political twist for me; I was struck by General Franco’s use of

language as a form of oppression throughout his regime. Ethical debates interest me too and I examined capital punishment for my Extended Project. Whilst I found Kant's retributivist theory of punishment interesting, I was more sympathetic to Amnesty International's argument, which highlighted evidence of racial bias within the US legal system. As an active member of Amnesty International myself, I am strongly in favour of abolishing the death penalty.

Last summer, I worked for my MP, helping him to maintain strong links with his constituency. I read letters and emails from constituents to identify the most popular concerns locally. I briefed him on my findings, helping him determine the issues he would bring up in Parliament. I also campaigned in Grove Ward, Kingston, for the council by-election in July. Canvassing from door to door proved much more effective than by telephone and I was struck by the widespread engagement with local politics. I have experienced life within the machinery of government too, at the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, where I saw the minute detail required when drafting consumer protection legislation. As House Captain and Prefect at school, I enjoy supporting younger students.

I love the dynamic nature of Politics in my studies and everyday life and strongly believe that I have the intellect, energy and enthusiasm to study the subject successfully at university.

## **What do we think?**

This personal statement demonstrates a strong engagement with a range of themes central to the HSPS curriculum, from contemporary geopolitics to the history of political thought and questions of crime and justice. The candidate effectively highlights their awareness of current global political issues, such as the questionable legitimacy of Russian elections, the challenges of promoting democracy in the Middle East, and the rise of China's non-democratic model. The integration of references to political thinkers like Machiavelli and contemporary analysts like Jonathan Powell shows a depth of understanding and ability to relate historical concepts to modern-day issues. The statement deploys mention of extra-curricular activities effectively, connecting them to their academic topics of concern; and does well to draw out the links between HSPS and their chosen A-Levels, for instance in studying Arthur Miller's 'The Crucible.' However, it would benefit by staking a clear position on some of the issues raised in the first two paragraphs, as it tends to read more like a survey of issues than an account of one's own thinking.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Democracy and State Success:** How do you reconcile the notion that the success of a state depends on more than democracy alone, considering examples like China's economic growth and the instability in post-Hussein Iraq?
- **Political Theorists:** How do you apply Machiavelli's ideas on leadership to contemporary political situations, and do you find Jonathan Powell's interpretation relevant today?
- **Debating Experience:** How has your experience debating on international stages, such as in Slovenia and the House of Lords, influenced your understanding of global political dynamics?
- **Ethical Debates:** How did your research on capital punishment for your Extended Project shape your views on retributivist theory versus Amnesty International's stance on racial bias in the US legal system?
- **Political Campaigns:** What insights did you gain about local political engagement and constituency issues from your work with your MP and during the council by-election campaign in Kingston?

### **Example Two – Economics, University of Cambridge**

There are many descriptions of Economics available, but the one that best encapsulates my view is that of Keynes: 'a science of thinking in models joined to the art of choosing models which are relevant'. The distinction of this combination is what draws me and makes it so valuable as a discipline.

In the past I have participated in university summer schools at Durham and Oxford; I relished the opportunity to work alongside like-minded students and consequently produced particularly high standard work. I crave the intellectual stimulation that, like the summer schools, studying at a prestigious university would offer.

Taking part in a World Challenge expedition, I spent August 2013 in rural Kenya and Tanzania helping to construct a medical centre. In addition to developing leadership and team-working skills, my position as group accountant left me uniquely exposed to the disparity between my life at home and those we were living amongst. I returned eager to understand how such inequality was possible in our increasingly globalised world, and how it might be reduced.

Beginning to explore the subject further, from a subscription to *The Economist* to the work of game theorists in 'The Art of Strategy', my interest in Economics has bloomed. My current studies from optimisation in Maths to the impact of hyperinflation in interwar Germany have taken on a wholly new dimension. Economics has quickly become the source of passion in my studies, prompting me to pick up a full A-level in Further Maths this year to enhance my Economics-related skills.

I studied the AS section of the course over the summer holidays, and believe the A I recently achieved in a mock-exam exemplifies my self-motivation and ability to learn independently. The drive to achieve has pushed me to accomplish the academic results I have whilst simultaneously competing as an endurance athlete with a 1:19 half-marathon time, working part-time and also being an active member of my Sixth-Form's debating society. I excel under high workloads and thrive under pressure.

An area of Economics that particularly interests me is Game Theory, which struck me as brilliant in scientifically optimising human interactions. I attended an enthralling lecture by Ian Crawford on its everyday applications, from pricing in business to Vickrey's work in creating optimal auctions. Equally, my experiences in Kenya fostered an interest in Economic theories on immigration and labour on an international scale. I have explored the issue through online journal articles: Michael Clemens' article on immigration and its Economic potential particularly captivated me. The huge predicted benefits of reducing global migration barriers changed my original views dramatically. Additionally, Clemens' allusions to the lack of significant research in the area make it a relatively unexplored and exciting area of Economics. Ricardo and many others have examined the benefits of free trade; my interest lies in the potential of a freed global labour force.

I believe in constant self-improvement, and as part of this I constantly challenge myself through extracurricular reading. I have developed my understanding of the banking system and the 2007 market crash through 'The Ascent of Money'. I was fascinated by Ferguson's theory of the financial system's inherent evolutionary properties, and appreciated learning both how the current system came to be and how it developed. More recently, I have read the work of Adam Smith in 'The Wealth of Nations': his theories on the real value of commodities and the ineffectuality of mercantilism particularly intrigued me.

By studying Economics, I hope to develop my understanding of the theories behind international trade and immigration, as well as my grasp of Game Theory. Ultimately it is my passion for the discipline and my drive to succeed, coupled with academic potential that I believe make me ideally suited to maximise my University life and the opportunities it provides.

## What do we think?

This personal statement compellingly showcases the candidate's passion for Economics, covering a broad range of topics – from Game Theory to the constitution of the global labour force – while giving a sense of their positions on such issues. They resonate with Keynes's view of Economics as both a science and an art, and have pursued this interest via university summer schools and extensive extracurricular reading. They demonstrate good reading comprehension and are able to pinpoint specific areas for future study, and successfully weave in accounts of extracurricular activities, for instance in their World Challenge expedition to Kenya and Tanzania. It would benefit from including some critical positions on the works or topics cited, perhaps reflecting on the import of Smith's critique of mercantilism in a globalised world, or the risks of exploitation for immigrant labour forces. To include such elements, they might want to cut back on some of the non-academic activities mentioned: a 1:19 half-marathon time is impressive, but it does not necessarily make a good economist!

## Possible Interview Questions:

- **Model Selection in Economics:** How do you interpret Keynes' idea of Economics as a combination of model thinking and choosing relevant models, and can you provide an example from your studies?
- **Global Inequality:** How did your experience in Kenya and Tanzania shape your understanding of global inequality, and what economic theories do you find most relevant in addressing this issue?
- **Game Theory:** What specific applications of Game Theory, as discussed in Ian Crawford's lecture, do you find most intriguing, and how do they influence your perspective on economic interactions?
- **Immigration Economics:** How did Michael Clemens' article on immigration change your views, and what potential economic benefits do you see in reducing global migration barriers?
- **Financial Systems:** How do Ferguson's evolutionary theory of financial systems in "The Ascent of Money" and Smith's theories in "The Wealth of Nations" inform your understanding of modern economics?

### **Example Three – Law, University of Oxford**

The Law does not exist in a void; wide-reaching and interconnected, it touches everything we do. This breadth and complexity drives my curiosity and interest, fuelling a passion for the subject.

Through my EPQ, which focused on regulation and access to mineral markets, I have seen how a small change in international law can impact members of our society. For example, the introduction of conflict mineral legislation has made it very difficult (until recently) for artisanal miners to export into world markets, endangering their jobs and hurting their development. Whilst this is a very niche example, it showed me how important Law is, its potential complexity, and the range of effects it can have. Additionally, the project helped me to develop a number of skills including organisation, independence and research abilities.

For my work experience, I was able to explore how GDPR was being implemented at a GP Surgery and Dental Practice. I spent time with the GP manager, discussing how GDPR affects the medical world, and how they have approached it. I then used their guidance, the British Dental Association and personal research, to assist the Dental Practice in updating relevant policies and privacy statements. I also gave a presentation to staff. This experience highlighted both the delicate relationship between medical ethics and commercial interests, and confidentiality's importance. I have extended my knowledge of this area of law further by reading *Data and Goliath* by Bruce Schneier, which helped to show the loss of sovereignty over personal data present pre-GDPR, along with introducing me to a wider jurisprudential debate about the relationship between government and individuals (initially through surveillance).

On a personal level, I have seen first-hand the effects of Law by benefitting from the Equality Act. This legislation paved the way for me to work on a laptop ensuring I could reach my academic potential and helped to protect me from unfair disadvantage in my Maths exams. This emphasised for me the importance of safeguarding rights and equality, an area I seek to further my knowledge in. Moreover, my participation in King's College's Pre-University Taster course advanced my exposure to the ECHR and Human Rights Act, and the problems they have. These were demonstrated through analysis and debate surrounding prisoner voting and the police's use of kettling in protests. Personally, I am against the use of this technique in all but the most necessary of times, even during which it should only be used as a last resort.

My A-levels have provided an opportunity to become proficient in a range of skills, including communication, extended writing and presentation. They have exposed me to the aspects of our wider society, both financial and humanitarian. This includes issues



surrounding the minimum wage and how it safeguards customers yet decreases business opportunity. A broad foundation of abilities and knowledge is something I view as highly significant for success in Law.

My chairing of my school's MUN has equipped me with debating and diplomatic skills, along with the ability to quickly fasten and utilise working relationships. I succeeded in the BASE and Student Investor competitions, having harnessed my financial knowledge. I enjoy playing in a samba band, and was part of the Bath Carnival team, where I produced software to record and process crowd numbers: my calculations resulted in a funding increase from the council.

This all brings a fascination in the sheer extent and diversity of the Law. Complex information is highly stimulating and interesting to me; I inquisitively make connection between abstract information from various disciplines, and I am passionate and driven in my quest to achieve.

## **What do we think?**

This personal statement effectively demonstrates the candidate's passion for Law, supported by a range of relevant experiences and skills. The candidate illustrates their understanding of the impact and complexity of Law through their Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) on regulation and access to mineral markets, highlighting how international legislation can affect local economies. Their work experience with GDPR implementation at GP practices is an excellent example of extra-curricular activities being used to strengthen one's academic knowledge, with is further developed in discussion of the Pre-University Taster course at King's College. It is clear that the candidate has a rich understanding of the tensions at the centre of Law, weighing up different rights and liberties and exploring their practical articulations. At points, however, the writing comes across as overly schematic, particularly the last clause about being 'passionate and driven in my quest to achieve.' While difficult, try and avoid easy clichés like these, instead being more concrete in your aspirations for academic study, for instance by mentioning specific topics on the undergraduate curriculum you are excited to explore.

**Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Conflict Mineral Legislation:** How did your EPQ on regulation and access to mineral markets illustrate the impact of international law on local economies?
- **GDPR Implementation:** How did this experience enhance your understanding of the balance between medical ethics and commercial interests?
- **Equality Act:** How has your personal experience with the Equality Act influenced your views on the importance of safeguarding rights and equality in legal frameworks?
- **Human Rights Debate:** Based on your exposure to the ECHR and Human Rights Act, what are your views on the use of kettling in protests?
- **Multidisciplinary Skills:** From your experience in MUN, do you think logic or rhetorical power is more important in convincing someone of your argument?

**Example Four – Geography, University of Oxford**

My passion for Geography stems from my international background. I have lived in Geneva since I was born, and been raised in a multi-cultural family with parents from Montreal and Buenos Aires. Speaking four languages fluently has allowed me to understand local cultures in an intimate way and has extended my curiosity about their difference and similarities. More recently, studying a wide range of subjects for my Bilingual (French/German) Certificat de Maturité including Physics, Maths, History and Philosophy, has allowed me to develop a broad vision of the world; I am attracted to Geography as a diverse subject that is able to bridge these various disciplines. I take a particular interest in Geopolitics, and have pursued a deeper understanding of the factors driving geopolitical conflict by reading in French and English, and through my other studies.

One such opportunity arose through my High School Thesis, which I chose to write on “Why is water a source of tensions between countries?” My work showed me how a single resource can be the principal vector of both war and peace in many parts of the world, driving political, social and economic relationships between states. Travelling to Jordan and Israel allowed me to see first hand the importance of water in Middle East politics, made more critical by a quickly-growing population. Furthermore, trekking in

Ladakh, India last summer helped me understand how important the conservation of glaciers -essential for the survival of rivers- is for the economic survival of a region that depends on water for local agriculture as well as for domestic use. Keen to pursue my interest in this area, I have read “L’avenir de l’eau” (“The future of Water”) by Eric Orsenna, and “Collapse” by Jared Diamond, who demonstrates how important the management of water and other resources was in determining the fate of past societies. My time in Kashmir also allowed me to see how global political decisions (splitting Kashmir into three countries) can lead to decades of unrest.

I have sought to further my interest in Geography and the world around me by becoming involved in several organizations. My selection as a participant in the Student’s United Nations of Switzerland has drawn my attention to both the importance and difficulty of making the right decision. I have been very active in a non-political, non-religious international organization called Children’s International Summer Village, promoting peace and global friendship worldwide. As a member of the Swiss Junior Branch board, I have participated in camps in North and South America and the Middle East. Last year, as my grades allowed it, I spent two months in Argentina doing humanitarian work, where I was struck by the ravages of injustice and corruption. This inspired me to explore the reasons underlying the global inequalities and the disparities in wealth between different countries that I witnessed; I have since read “The Rise and Fall of Great Powers” by Paul Kennedy.

I enjoy several extracurricular activities. Being an accomplished fencer – I have been ranked 4th in Switzerland, qualified for the European Championships this year and have participated in several Junior World Cups – has taught me that determination is the key to success. As one of the heads of my school newspaper I have learnt the importance of teamwork. I also enjoy alpine and cross-country skiing and playing the flute, both to a good standard. During my gap year, I hope to volunteer in humanitarian missions in English-speaking countries. I will also use the opportunity to gain work experience. I look forward to studying Geography at a higher level, and I believe that my curiosity and motivation can bring something to the University and its community.

## **What do we think?**

This personal statement provides a great case for the candidate's application to study Geography, highlighting a strong international background and multilingual abilities that will bolster their understanding global issues. The candidate's High School Thesis on water-related geopolitical tensions and experiences in regions like Jordan and Ladakh demonstrate an initiative beyond the classroom, and an

analytical approach capable of blending together complex issues. Similarly, their involvement in global organizations showcases a commitment to addressing global challenges, however the academic depth drops off during these final two paragraphs, with the book by Paul Kennedy simply name-dropped rather than elaborated. Once again, it is important to avoid a list-approach of extra-curricular activities, instead connecting them to your studies and topics of concern.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Water Tensions:** How did your thesis on water tensions enhance your understanding of geopolitical conflicts?
- **Glacier Conservation:** What did your trekking in Ladakh teach you about the economic importance of glacier conservation?
- **Multicultural Impact:** How has your multicultural background and fluency in four languages shaped your view on global geography?
- **Humanitarian Insights:** What did your work in Argentina reveal about the causes of global inequalities?
- **Resource Management:** How have “L’avenir de l’eau” and “Collapse” influenced your views on the importance of resource management?

### **Example Five – Land Economy, University of Cambridge**

Visiting India on work experience last summer opened my eyes to the changes that are taking place in that country. Having visited five years previously, I was not only astounded by how much had changed but also excited by the prospects for future development and the potential benefits which this might bring for the population. During a month working as a journalist with “*The Hindu*”, the world’s second most widely-read English language newspaper, I gained an insight into the issues facing a developing country and an appreciation of the complex interplay between economic, political, cultural and environmental forces. At the time of my visit, the media was just awakening to the “New India” with a rash of stories in various British and American publications, including *Foreign Affairs*, the relentlessly upbeat tone of which often clashed with what I experienced first-hand. I encountered those who are gaining spectacularly from the economic ‘miracle’ but many also who are losing out. Above all, the experience instilled in me a sense of the importance that economics plays in shaping the lives of individuals and societies, and the need for an appreciation of local

realities in managing sustainable development - something subsequently reinforced by the holistic approach taken in Jeffrey Sachs' *"The End of Poverty"*, and Joseph E. Stiglitz' *"Making Globalization Work"*.

The experience has inspired me to pursue a degree which allows the application of theory to real-world issues of considerable importance - the stagnant or declining living standards, for example, of the poorest billion people, and the threat of catastrophic damage to the environment posed by haphazard development. In this, I will relish the chance to develop inter-disciplinary skills relating to my A-level subjects. Indeed, my enjoyment of Geography and Economics was largely attributable to their complementary nature. This, along with my interest in politics and law, allowed me to place what I was learning in a wider, more meaningful context. My interest in this range of disciplines was, I believe, a major factor in my winning the school's prize for Economics.

Beyond my academic work, I was selected by the Economics Faculty to captain the school's team in the Bank of England's MPC Target 2.0 competition. Giving a presentation and fielding questions from a panel of experts was a useful experience in communication and mastering a large amount of knowledge in a short time. This further developed the skills which I have learnt through my involvement in school debating competitions. As chairman of the school's Geographical Society, I was involved in publicizing and selecting speakers for a series of lectures which went beyond the confines of the A-level syllabus.

These lectures were followed by group discussions of the issues raised, and I particularly enjoyed the opportunity to examine issues through debate. As editor of the school's newspaper, I developed skills of teamwork and delegation and learnt how to cope with responsibility and tight deadlines. I was a finalist in a Sky competition and spent a week in their newsroom. This experience served to further my interest in current affairs and the media's role in shaping our perceptions.

In my Gap Year, I plan to take a Spanish course in preparation for traveling to Ecuador and Colombia next year. I will also be involved in a community youth project. I will also spend time with a micro-credit agency in Chennai, which will allow further possibilities for exploring the development issues faced at a local level in South India. These experiences will allow me to further my interest in foreign cultures, and provide a basis for specialisation during the degree.

## What do we think?

This personal statement effectively showcases the candidate's enthusiasm for Land Economy, driven by hands-on experiences and interdisciplinary academic interests. The month spent working with "The Hindu" newspaper in India provided a nuanced understanding of the economic, political, and environmental challenges facing a developing country. This first-hand experience, contrasted with Western media portrayals, deepened their appreciation for the complexities of sustainable development. The candidate's academic achievements in Geography and Economics, coupled with their engagement in school activities like the Bank of England's MPC Target 2.0 competition, demonstrate strong analytical skills. The planned Gap Year activities, including a Spanish course and work with a micro-credit agency, reflect a commitment to understanding global development issues and foreign cultures. However, this final paragraph once again risks becoming a list: 'I will also be involved in a community youth project' is left without any elaboration, whilst the discussion of the micro-credit agency effectively brings it back to the question of development at a local level.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Economic Change in India:** How did your work experience with "The Hindu" shape your understanding of the economic changes in India and their impact on different population segments?
- **Interdisciplinary Approach:** How have your studies in Geography and Economics complemented each other and influenced your interest in the interdisciplinary nature of Land Economy?
- **Development Theories:** How did Jeffrey Sachs' "The End of Poverty" and Joseph Stiglitz' "Making Globalization Work" reinforce your views on sustainable development and economic inequality?
- **Practical Experience:** What insights did you gain from participating in the Bank of England's MPC Target 2.0 competition, and how do they relate to your interest in Land Economy?
- **Future Plans:** What kind of local development issues might you expect to see during your time at the micro-credit agency in Chennai?

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# Languages and Literature

## Example One – *Classics, University of Oxford*

Discovering classical literature absorbed me deeply in the excitement of exploring the complex literary allusiveness of the Horatian ode and Virgilian epic, Plato’s philosophical sophistication, the dramatic power of the Sophoclean hero and, in the gripping narratives of Thucydides, the concrete historical impact of philosophical and literary ideas.

Studying “Antigone” at A-level inspired me to read the rest of the Sophoclean corpus, working through both ‘Philoctetes’ and the choral odes of “Antigone” in the original. I explored how Chrysothemis’ and Ismenes’ arguments illuminated by contrast the moral courage of Electra and Antigone. I was moved by the way in which the stubbornness of Antigone, Philoctetes and Electra propels them into unbearable isolation and found the all-consuming need of Philoctetes, Oedipus and Ajax to preserve their heroism and dignity even to the point of dying especially arresting.

I then looked to Plato’s ‘Crito’ to deepen my philosophical grasp of the tension between the laws of the polis and the eternal, unwritten laws in ‘Antigone’. The dialogue made me reflect on whether Antigone’s commitment to burying Polyneices is consistent with Socrates’ view that one must obey the laws of the polis regardless of their conformity to justice. Plato’s Socrates exhibits some of the features of Sophocles’ heroes: he is committed to obeying the gods, yet also seeks objective truth. Digesting the “Phaedo”, “Gorgias” and “Republic I” awakened an even keener interest in classical philosophy. Reading these dialogues alongside Thucydides—especially the Mytilenian and Melian Debates—showed how many of the proto-Nietzschean attitudes that Thrasymachus and Callicles advance in “Republic I” and the “Gorgias” could take a brutal historical shape.

The extent to which Thucydides psychologises individuals and groups raises fascinating historiographical questions: in the Pylos episode in Book IV, I found it difficult to believe that Thucydides was as confident of Cleon’s motives as he appears to be when describing the scenes in the assembly. My scepticism grew deeper when confronted with the apparent tension between the selfish rationale ascribed to him and his historical popularity as a general. My reading of secondary literature by Cawkwell, Kagan and Westlake (among others) did not in the end resolve the basic problem of how aware Thucydides was of Cleon’s motives and whether he offers a deliberately prejudiced view of him.

Exploring the assimilation of Greek thought into Roman culture—beautifully expressed in Horace’s remark that *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes / Intulit agresti Latio*—has been immensely rewarding. I admire how *Odes III* opens with an expression of respect both for his Greek literary predecessors and for the ideals of the Augustan regime. I found that the ease with which Zeus subdues the giants in his description of the “gigantomachia” in the fourth Roman Ode perfectly captures Horace’s consummate skill in adapting Greek myths and tropes to a Roman literary style and—albeit in a somewhat ambiguous way—to the Augustan agenda. Horace’s range of registers, his peculiar ability to generate a genuine intimacy with his reader in such poems as *Satire IX* is unrivalled. Horace’s lyricism and metrical flair were a perfect counterpoint to the grandeur of the epic genre I encountered on close readings of *Book IV* and *Book X* of the *Aeneid*.

I have recently developed an enthusiasm for classical archaeology by spending a month working on a project headed by Dr Simon Stoddart at sites from the Republican and Imperial periods on the boundary between Etruria and Umbria on either side of the Tiber.

I am convinced that Classics is the richest kind of education one can be fortunate enough to acquire and I hope to make the very most of the opportunities given to me to pursue my passion in the subject during my undergraduate years and beyond.

## What do we think?

The candidate’s passion and genuine interest in this subject is abundant and apparent from the start, though the remainder of the introduction does lend to a slightly list-like approach. The candidate would have benefitted from greater depth of analysis of the text(s) listed, rather than assumedly showcasing all the books they have read to evidence their love. Quality of analytical and evaluative response here would have very much done the same, as quantity. Nonetheless, it is clear the learner is incredibly well-read and informed that this is a subject they are ready to grasp at undergraduate level; however, I would have loved to have learned more about the project, and its links between archaeology to classics (thus providing an extra opportunity for analysis and synthesis).

## Possible Interview Questions:

- Sophoclean Heroes: How do you interpret the moral courage and stubbornness of Sophoclean heroes like Antigone, Philoctetes, and Electra, and what do these traits reveal about their characters?

- **Plato and Sophocles:** How does Plato's 'Crito' influence your understanding of the tension between the laws of the polis and the eternal laws in 'Antigone'?
- **Thucydides' Motives:** What are your thoughts on Thucydides' portrayal of Cleon in the Pylos episode, and how do you reconcile the tension between his described motives and his historical popularity?
- **Greek Influence on Roman Culture:** How does Horace's assimilation of Greek thought into Roman culture, especially in Odes III, reflect the relationship between Greek and Roman literary traditions?
- **Classical Archaeology:** How did your archaeological work on the boundary between Etruria and Umbria enhance your understanding of Roman and Etruscan cultural integration?

### **Example Two – Modern Languages, University of Oxford**

Ever since the most primitive societies were formed, language has been at the heart of our world. It has played a vital role in shaping cultures, fostering relationships, and sharing knowledge between different people. It has also played its part in war, destruction and human suffering. To better understand our world, therefore, the study of language and literature is vital. It is for this reason that I wish to pursue a Modern Languages degree. I believe studying languages will broaden my horizons and give me a deeper appreciation of the world in which I live and of my roots and I hope it will afford me the opportunity to play my own part in shaping our world.

My passion for languages is linked to my fascination for foreign cultures. Both complement each other in the sense that knowledge, understanding and appreciation of culture can be enhanced through the study of language. Growing up in Ecuador, having Ecuadorian and English nationality and having studied French to an advanced level, I am living proof that language influences and moulds individuals. My experience of participating in the Dias de Quito, Dia de los Difuntos and Las Procesiones de la Virgen in Ecuador and of dancing with friends to the bagpipes and standing around the Guy Fawkes bonfire during my year at a Scottish boarding school have shaped me as a person and have allowed me to develop a multi-cultural perspective on life, which I will bring to my Modern Languages studies.

I have used my IB studies to channel my energy into languages and to explore literature. I have developed a passion for literary analysis and interpretation and I want to

dedicate my academic output to this field. I have always seen literature as a way of travelling into someone else's life, of having experiences that go beyond my range of vision, and of better understanding why our world is the way it is. I have found Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Federico Garcia Lorca particularly stimulating. The way in which both utilize women as a means of portraying the culture of the time is especially interesting. Indeed, in *Del Amor y Otros Demonios*, Garcia Marquez uses magical realism to accentuate the role of women. Similarly, in *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, Garcia Lorca uses women to highlight religious traditions of the time and to illustrate the unrest that pervaded Spain in the build up to the Civil War. In terms of the literature of my home country, I enjoy Jorge Icaza's writing. His *Huasipungo* struck me in particular since it lays bare many harsh aspects of Ecuadorian society during 20th century. Los Caciques, the landowners, exercised immense power during this time and used their position to manipulate the indigenous people. The landowners' abuse of power has generated a corrupt image of Ecuador, which has been aggravated by more than a decade of political turmoil. Ecuador's neighbour, Peru provides a stark contrast. While Peru's literary giant, Mario Vargas Llosa, has brought the country to the forefront with his impressive Nobel Prize win, Ecuador confronts the world press with photos of its President in a gas mask, thus exacerbating its less than credible image.

I am eager to contribute extensively to university life on both an academic and a personal level. I am passionate about sport and this year undertook the presidency of the Sports Council. I contributed to the school sports program by organizing tournaments, school events and fundraising. I am also a keen classical dancer and have taught ballet to children. Moreover, this year I was elected vice-president of the National Honour Society, a society which selects students who have excelled academically to represent the school and perform voluntary activities. I capitalized on this by writing an Extended Essay for the IB on the children of Otavalo and by teaching English to less fortunate Ecuadorian children. This experience was immensely enjoyable; I was thrilled to see the children progress with their English.

I am passionate about languages and literature and I look forward to the challenges of a Modern Languages degree. I am determined to take full advantage of my university years and I will embrace the experience wholeheartedly.

## What do we think?

As an admissions reader for Oxford, I would be very reassured by this statement that the candidate is a great fit for their literature-heavy languages course. Whilst there perhaps could be more mention of other linguistic aspects of the programme,

such as core language and grammar, their enthusiasm for the sociocultural elements of target language learning is omnipresent. I would say, however, their extra-curricular paragraph does come off as one long list of activities, which demonstrate the students' wider student life contributions to the university, but they are not related back to the study of Modern Languages – which would have helped strengthen this section. Finally, the candidate does not make it clear which language(s) to which they are applying – given their nationality, mentioned books, and advanced French, we can presume French and Spanish, but it would help them to clarify (unless they are applying to different courses at different universities, of course!).

### **Possible Interview Questions;**

- **Cultural Influence:** In what ways have your experiences in Ecuador and Scotland shaped your understanding of the relationship between language and culture?
- **Literary Analysis:** What insights do Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Federico Garcia Lorca offer about cultural and historical contexts through their portrayal of female characters?
- **Ecuadorian Literature:** Discuss the societal issues presented in Jorge Icaza's "Huasipungo" and their relevance to Ecuador's current political situation.
- **Language and Identity:** Describe the impact of your multilingual background on your personal identity and global perspective.
- **Educational Contributions:** What did you learn from teaching English in Ecuador and your role in the National Honour Society about the importance of language education and cultural exchange?

### **Example Three – English Literature, University of Cambridge**

Literature is not, for me, about celebrating life or escaping reality - it is an art whose primary preoccupation is death. It is both a challenge to our own mortality and an acknowledgement of the fear of dying. T.S. Eliot considers this when he states that "Every poem [is] an epitaph." We create literature for the egoistic purpose of making immortal some part of our otherwise mortal self. In 'Mrs. Dalloway', Clarissa sees

Septimus' death as an "attempt to communicate" - I would argue that literature in general is an attempt to communicate despite, and in the face of, death.

We cannot celebrate life without recognising its inverse: death. This is why I believe there is no place for happy endings in literature. Characters can live "happily ever after" but they cannot live happily forever after. 'Bluebeard', 'Lolita', 'King Lear', texts which are haunted by the memory of the fairytale, acknowledge this. They may begin in a land of enchantment and deception, peopled with evil step-parents or wicked sisters, but the line between good and bad soon becomes ambiguous. The happy ending becomes so unsatisfying or incomplete, the narratives so confrontational and unvarnished, that we are afforded no charmed sleep, only permanent, uncaring death. These texts demonstrate why we must applaud authenticity over artifice. When Samuel Johnson praises Tate for removing the "suffrage" of the unendurable death of Cordelia in King Lear he ignores the fact that death is unendurable. Without it the play has not only lost "half its beauty" but also half its tragedy. Fairytales are not just tales of fairies but parables of caution: we cannot recognise King Lear's teaching that "crimes lead to crimes, and at last terminate in ruin" when that ruin is diminished to pacify "the publick".

I first discovered the darkened fairytale in the works of Tove Jansson and my continued appreciation of this author eventually led me to my favourite literary form - the short story. In the works of Chekhov, the Modernists, and contemporary contributors to Granta, I have recognised an unadulterated quality in this genre, rather than the aborted or truncated nature implied by the qualifier 'short'. At their best, I believe they offer the most authentic representation of real life without the artifice of plot, exposition and neatly tied endings; they provide the most direct, unmodified version of the writer's initial intent. To be read in one sitting, their purity of style also affords the reader the greatest purity of response. The vicious honesty of Woolf's 'Street Haunting' and the disconcerting ambiguity of Joyce's 'An Encounter' were two of the greatest influences in my desire to study literature.

It is tempting to try to draw parallels between the short story and the play due to their shared immediacy of experience. Yet I ultimately find it hard to reconcile theatre and literature; for me, they are separate art forms between which the written script must be awkwardly shared. But if we view literature as a fight against our impermanent nature we must see theatre as a tribute to this same quality. Considering this discrepancy between literary forms encouraged me to start a discussion in my role as President of my school's Literary Society on the value of the New Historicist approach. We must separate literary and non-literary texts just as we must separate the short story and the short play because of the difference in intention behind their creation. Literature

demands the reader, who is essential in the author's desire to remain. If a text was not created to be read it cannot be twinned with literature, because without the reader it cannot strive for permanence.

We can inform this dialogue with the dead through the ongoing conversation of literary criticism - it is this challenge that I am eager to undertake at university.

## **What do we think?**

The candidate exudes a passion for Literature, and is evidently ready for the rigours of an undergraduate course, where they are already demonstrating an authoritative grasp of literary concepts, themes and theories. However, whilst it is superb to see the candidate share their own perspectives and conclusions on the primary texts they have read, it would have been beneficial to demonstrate their command of secondary reading and a broader research of the themes introduced. Furthermore, it seems perhaps somewhat paradoxical that the candidate's "greatest influences" in their decision to pursue a degree in this subject are two texts that did not go further than a brief description (i.e. "disconcerting ambiguity" and "vicious honesty".) For these texts to be claimed as their greatest driver, I would have expected to see more depth of analysis of the primary and secondary literature to be dedicated to these readings.

## **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Literature and Mortality:** In what ways do you see literature as a challenge to our mortality and an attempt to communicate in the face of death, as suggested by T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf?
- **Authenticity vs. Artifice:** Discuss your perspective on why literature should prioritize authenticity over artifice, using examples from 'King Lear' and other works you mentioned.
- **Short Stories:** What qualities do you find most compelling in short stories by authors like Chekhov and Woolf, and how do they achieve an unmodified representation of real life?
- **Literature vs. Theatre:** How do you differentiate between the literary and theatrical experiences, and why do you believe they should be viewed as separate art forms?



- New Historicist Approach: What is your stance on the New Historicist approach to literary criticism, and how do you see it applying to the separation of literary and non-literary texts?

### **Example Four – Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, University of Cambridge**

In 2009, when the Staffordshire Hoard was discovered, the public was reminded that the study of the early mediæval period is vibrant and engaging. The historiography of the era relies heavily on material evidence such as this. James Campbell's *The Anglo-Saxons* (1991), where he devotes much time to the examination of artefacts, helped make clear to me the importance of this approach. My interest came alive when I saw the Alfred Jewel and the treasures of the Sutton Hoo ship burial, and I hoped that I would have the opportunity to analyse the discoveries of the future. My fascination with this Anglo-Saxon material led to a wider interest, and this year I am going to Denmark to visit the Jelling Stones and the Roskilde Viking Ship Museum.

I have been lucky enough to study some Anglo-Saxon history at school. For coursework, I chose to write on Alfred “the Great”, addressing the justification for his epithet, and engaging with primary sources, such as Asser's *Life Of King Alfred*. I also read sections of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* when studying the Norman Conquest. Both illustrated the challenges of interpreting this period in terms of historical objectivity. I learned that record keeping under Alfred's auspices was encouraged, but that the accounts were often skewed in his favour: Alfred's court-writers were arguably responsible for shaping our rosy perception of him. However, later kings such as Æthelstan could never have achieved so much without the foundations laid by Alfred, and showed me that his title was deserved. Never had I studied a leader whose legacy contributed so much, both politically and intellectually.

Of the five languages that I learned at school, Latin has given me the most opportunities for further exploration. I have taught Latin and Classical Greek to younger children, and won a gold medal in the American National Latin Exam *summa cum laude*. I read poetry and historical texts in the original for my Latin A-level course, and I am eager to explore later insular texts. I am also learning Old English this year: I began by translating some riddles, and am now working on the *Dream of the Rood*. Having read *Beowulf*, I now have a better understanding of the influence of Christian themes upon the literature of the period. It was interesting to compare the personal suffering of the anthropomorphised Cross of the *Dream*, and the moral tone of *Beowulf*, both equally significant to our view of Christianity at the time.

My A-level history course included 19th Century Ireland, and I was particularly fascinated by the ways in which Irish cultural nationalism used pre- and early Christian culture to emphasise the divide between Ireland and Britain. I am reading the *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, which remind me of the importance of literature to the historians of this period. Other works of the same era, such as *Njal's Saga* and *Beowulf* provide a vivid cultural snapshot, better than most mediæval records; writers such as Geoffrey of Monmouth reveal the limitations of “historical” accounts.

I travelled to Italy last summer to take a course on the art and culture of the classical to early modern eras, and I am returning for six weeks next spring. I was particularly struck by the importance of the classical and mediæval periods to the foundation of Renaissance art and literature. The highlight of the course was the Basilica of San Clemente where I could see the evolution of Christianity from the first to the tenth centuries all on one site, and brought to life my study of Tacitus's records of Christianity in Annals XV. I now write online articles on art and architecture, and was chosen to become a student ambassador for the company that leads the course. Prior to this I began writing as a culture editor for my school's Classics magazine. Combining my love of literature and history was always my aim when choosing a university course, and the subject that provides me with the perfect opportunity to do so is the early mediæval period.

## What do we think?

Evidently, the candidate has a wide array of academic interests, both within this broad course, but also the applications of ASNAC to Classics and Theology. However, the candidate would have benefitted from more signposting about the interplay between Latin and their decision to pursue Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic – other than demonstrating that they are, of course, a natural and national award-winning linguist! Some sentences could be removed to save on valuable characters; an example being “I have been lucky enough to study some Anglo-Saxon history at school.”; additionally, showcasing what the learner does *outside* of the mandatory school curriculum in their super-curricular activities is more impressive and demonstrates their initiative to go ‘above and beyond’. As such, instead, I would have loved to have read more about some of the articles that the candidate has written – this would have shown their true ingenuity and creativity in an analytical and evaluative manner.

**Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Material Evidence:** How has the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard and other artefacts influenced your understanding of the early medieval period?
- **Alfred “the Great”:** Based on your coursework, what are your views on the justification for Alfred’s epithet and the influence of his court-writers on our perception of him?
- **Old English Literature:** How do the Christian themes in "Beowulf" and "The Dream of the Rood" shape our understanding of Anglo-Saxon literature and its cultural context?
- **Irish Cultural Nationalism:** What insights did you gain from studying 19th-century Irish cultural nationalism and its use of pre- and early Christian culture?
- **Interdisciplinary Studies:** How have your experiences studying Latin, Classical Greek, and early medieval art and architecture influenced your approach to Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic studies?

**Example Five – Linguistics, University of Cambridge**

My life has been characterized by immersion in several languages. I have lived in six different countries, mostly in expatriate communities, where means of expression are naturally eclectic. This exposed me to the breadth of human language: I studied French, Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia, Latin and Ancient Greek, and gained familiarity with other languages through travel. Remarking upon the Malay and Indonesian use of the plural to evoke one butterfly bemused me as a toddler. Linguistics has since become the axis of my education. To gain a deeper knowledge of the Sapir-Whorf argument for linguistic relativity, I read Steven Pinker’s ‘The Stuff of Thought’ and Guy Deutscher’s ‘Through the Language Glass’. Investigating their hypotheses prompted me to combine the disciplines of logical reasoning and analytical interpretation in order to construct a critical evaluation of each argument. Their case studies initiated my humble scepticism in that they exemplify how language can alter minor interpretations, not a wider worldview. I follow Science Daily and TEDtalks to monitor contemporary studies, and I attend three hours of linguistics lectures per week at Columbia University. Learning to transcribe using the International Phonetic Alphabet in the context of American pronunciation has been an insightful experience into my own articulation.

My aspiration to study linguistics is complemented by my secondary education. Alongside calculus and chemistry, I study foreign literature and history to allow me to appreciate literary classics and global ideologies in their original language and context. In connection with the latter, I explored diachronic linguistics through Jean Aitchson's 'Language Change: Progress or Decay', which led me to question my prior conceptions as to what defines a language as progressive, what classifies its demise, and whether language change is a cause or symptom of progress or decay.

Language-orientated tasks direct my personal interests. As a member of a debating squad and a Model United Nations team, I constantly scrutinize my use of language to optimize my rhetoric, which manifests in national competitions and class discussions. My internship at Argus Ltd entailed meticulous editorial work, valuable training for my role as senior editor of my school magazine. For three years I have tutored non-native speakers in English in London, India and New York. This enables me to employ my theoretical knowledge of linguistics, specifically William Labov's 'Academic Ignorance and Black Intelligence'. Observing the children's rapid progression from uttering holophrases to initiating discussions convinced me of the existence of an inbuilt neurological mechanism and critical period for language acquisition.

I am a member of the School Captain's Coalition (a specialized cooperative leadership program), a nationally ranked cross-country runner (6th in the South of England, 21st in England), and a Grade 5 pianist. To raise £3,000 for a World Challenge expedition, I started my own business; I was in my element in the entrepreneurial sphere, and became astonished at the degree to which a way with words can influence the success of a business venture.

Moving from the UK to the US halfway through my first term in Year 12 sharpened my consciousness of verbalization. Living apart from my family socially tested my adaptability and responsibility. Given dedication with which I pursue my academic and extra-curricular activities, I would meet intensity of a linguistics degree with commitment and enthusiasm. Both my school subjects and itinerate upbringing relate to the science of language in their relations and affinities, fostering my sensitivity to the crucial role of language and interpretation. Experiencing linguistics in the context of books, essays, lectures and everyday life has instilled an intellectual curiosity, and an ambition to maximize my scholarly knowledge of linguistics at an undergraduate level and beyond.

## **What do we think?**

From the outset, the applicant is enthralled by both learning various languages, and comparing their linguistic structures. The introduction was a captivating read,

showing a ‘springboard’ of how certain experiences led to further research and exploration (albeit perhaps listy by the end).

I would have appreciated more depth when ‘exploring’ diachronic linguistics, as they withheld their own opinion or secondary reading to analyse, synthesise and/or contrast. Or, also, in their assertion that their entrepreneurial spirit is borne from their ‘way with words’; for a Linguistics applicant, I would have liked to have seen more targeted vocabulary such as semantics or discourse analysis for a more authoritative statement.

I did, however, appreciate learning about their use of Labov’s theory in application when teaching – though, I was keen to learn more about what precise concepts, they used in their action research on target language instruction.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Linguistic Relativity:** What conclusions did you draw from Steven Pinker’s and Guy Deutscher’s arguments on linguistic relativity, and how do they influence your perspective on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis?
- **Diachronic Linguistics:** How did Jean Aitchison’s ‘Language Change: Progress or Decay’ challenge your views on what defines the progression or decay of a language?
- **Language Acquisition:** Based on your tutoring experience and William Labov’s theories, what evidence do you find most compelling for the existence of a critical period for language acquisition?
- **Phonetic Transcription:** What insights have you gained from learning to transcribe using the International Phonetic Alphabet, particularly regarding American pronunciation and your own articulation?
- **Multilingual Influence:** How has living in six different countries and being exposed to multiple languages shaped your understanding of linguistic diversity and its impact on communication?

# Humanities

## **Example One – History, University of Oxford**

Travelling in Cuba, I was surprised at the lack of extreme poverty compared with other countries I have visited, such as India. Both cultures have a history of conquest, occupation, and migration, but Cuba is notable for its extraordinary range of ethnic types. It made me reflect on competing ideologies and brought to life my study of the Cold War and twentieth-century political dynamics.

I believe that History provides in-depth knowledge of why civilisation has reached its present state and of why our society consists of such a melting pot of often contradictory beliefs. I relish stories of conquerors and kings, conflict and peace, democracy, and dictatorship. The most powerful topic in AS History was US Civil Rights (1945-1968), and Martin Luther King's 1963 speech struck me as a climactic moment in the campaign for racial equality, combining raw emotion and calculated rhetoric. The underlying forces of the movement are captured in Adam Fairclough's penetrating analysis, *Better Day Coming*, one of the books which led me to take up History. King's oration also resonated with me as I followed recent events in Ferguson and Charleston, which highlighted the ongoing nature of the struggle for social, legal, and economic justice among African Americans, as well as the fundamental importance of questions of ethnicity. Similar questions arise as today's migration crisis plays out along the borders of Europe.

After analysing a wide variety of source material, including classics such as Rousseau's *Social Contract*, I have become interested in historiography; specifically, how the socio-political pressures of an era together with the writer's personal prejudices can interfere with a recorded document's legitimacy. I was fortunate enough to attend a seminar on source analysis as part of a History masterclass at Pembroke College, Cambridge, which was particularly inspiring, and taught me how to recognise bias in even the most apparently objective of witnesses. My other AS subjects have complemented and expanded my historical knowledge. Maths has developed my problem solving and critical thinking, skills which facilitate a richer engagement with sources. Music has increased my confidence, patience and perseverance. My enthusiasm for politics has led me to join the executive of a local political party, successfully canvas for a council election, and complete a rewarding work placement at a cross-partisan think tank, the Henry Jackson Society in Millbank Tower. I am interested in the way that activism and commitment to a cause can arise from a deeper understanding of History: for example how past migration in other cultures such as Cuba might affect our attitude to the present European crisis. I enjoyed reading Richard Gott's *Cuba: A New History*, a book I

used to gain perspective while researching my Extended Project - a textbook on modern Cuba - which was recommended to me by the British Ambassador to Cuba after I sent him an email describing my aims.

As well as my academic strengths, which have included winning an award for the best GCSE results at secondary school and achieving full UMS (200) in AS History, I enjoy a range of activities that have improved my capacity to learn. Team sports have taught me how to lead. Music has always been a priority as I love rhythm. Voluntary work as a Hospital Radio presenter, Park Run marshal and at the Cambridge Festival of Ideas has helped me support the local community. After Higher Education, I would like to have a career as a civil servant or journalist - the latter aspiration enhanced by my work with best-selling drum magazine 'Rhythm' as well as being a sports writer for our college newspaper.

Reading History at university is a challenge that I will embrace. I hope to return to Cuba to see for myself the effects of a new kind of transformation on a very unique culture - but with the benefit of a more mature understanding of History.

## **What do we think?**

This applicant effectively gives their own response to academic ideas throughout the statement, indicating they will be an independently minded undergraduate student. They also increase the individuality of their statement by making interesting links between their own extracurricular interests and activities and their chosen course's subject matter. For instance, describing how their experience working for a local political party was changed by understanding the history behind certain political movements. They could cut down slightly on describing any facts about their application which will already be evident in the adjoining evidence, such as their A Level subjects and AS marks. The example of Cuba is used as a bookmarking device to great effect; they do not simply return to the example at the end of the statement but indicate how it ties together their application. Overall, while the statement verges on the edge of scatty at times, an admissions tutor would be interested to meet this applicant, as they have given so many ideas to discuss.

## **Possible Interview Questions:**

- Cuban and Indian Histories: How do the different historical trajectories of Cuba and India contribute to the disparities in poverty and ethnic diversity you observed?



- **Historiography and Bias:** In what ways do socio-political pressures and personal prejudices of an era influence the legitimacy of historical documents, as discussed in your Pembroke College seminar?
- **US Civil Rights Movement:** How do you relate the historical struggle for racial equality in the US Civil Rights Movement to contemporary issues like the events in Ferguson and Charleston?
- **Migration and History:** How does the history of migration in cultures such as Cuba inform your perspective on the current European migration crisis?
- **Activism and History:** How has your understanding of historical activism, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Cuban history, influenced your involvement in contemporary political and social causes?

### **Example Two – Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Oxford**

I am drawn to archaeology by its huge range and scope for discovery. Although it is often asserted that the study of the past is not relevant today, my view is that archaeology is not simply an escape from the present, but offers us perspective of our evolving identity.

Archaeology is fascinating in the way it uses snapshots of the past to draw much larger conclusions about a civilisation or historical period. Part of my initial interest in archaeology resulted from studying Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos: by examining small traces of an ancient script he was able to make a much larger discovery that caused a huge shift in how a whole aspect of European history is perceived.

My interest in archaeology led me to read 'Figuring it Out' by Colin Renfrew, which illustrates a surprising link between archaeologists and contemporary artists, showing how both attempt to understand the world and our place within it. Renfrew asks important questions as to how and why humanity has used art and why objects that were once thought plain are now considered to be works of beauty. I considered Renfrew's questions about the history of humanity's relationship with art while working for the National Trust at Powys Castle, and gained an insight into why some objects are appreciated and regarded as more beautiful than others. A sculpture previously thought to be Roman is now considered to be an 18th-century fake. Despite the quality of the object not changing, this new estimate of age and provenance reduced its cultural and historical significance as well as its financial value.

I recently took part in an excavation looking at an Iron Age settlement in Pembrokeshire, looking for traces of domestic and defensive activity. I learnt about the initial process of

an excavation using a geophysical survey, and the results that are thrown up when on site. Nearby, what had previously been thought to be a standing stone was discovered to be a capstone of a dismantled burial chamber. I came to understand better the role of the archaeologist as a detective and interpreter of evidence, who must make value judgements based on limited material that can impact upon later conclusions.

My interest in archaeology has also led to one in anthropology. Another society is often very different materially but also in how it thinks and what it values. In order to understand a culture, the context in which objects were made has to be looked at. Anthropology exposes one to different religions, languages and moral codes, meaning that it has a great capacity to question our most basic assumptions. 'Watching the English', by Kate Fox, led me to recognise previously unnoticed characteristics in my own culture, something with which I assumed I was very familiar. It has a revealing chapter on class and its subtle distinctions governed by clothing and language. It is therefore fascinating to come at Britain's political beliefs from an anthropological angle which, thanks to my work experience with an MP in Westminster, I feel able to do in some depth. Our society puts particular emphasis on individual property and human rights that would seem alien to another society. For instance, while today we have strict intellectual property rights, in ancient Greek culture, texts or epic poems were seen as commonly owned. This seems bizarre now, but would have been quite normal in ancient Greece.

As Head of House at school, I enjoyed witnessing how a large number of people work together to achieve a common aim. I was a senior member of the CCF and helped run a number of field days. I play the violin and viola to diploma level and was awarded a music scholarship. I have enjoyed playing music from a diverse repertoire, which has helped me understand how music has developed over time and realise a certain personal fulfillment. I feel that these achievements show I am self-reliant and hard-working, and that a working knowledge of other disciplines will contribute to the study of my subject.

## **What do we think?**

This applicant has paced and structured their material to make their statement easy to follow. Inevitably, this would have involved cutting down on their total number of ideas and pieces of evidence, but the pay-off is that ideas are more fully fleshed-out and better-expressed. The paragraph on Renfrew and his connection between art and archaeology, for instance, is highly effective, and preferable to trying to squeeze two or three more pieces of reading into it. This applicant might have chosen to use less characters to introduce their interest in archaeology, however, with one of the first two paragraphs being dispensable. If they were

struggling for space, we might advise this applicant to begin with ‘Archaeology is fascinating...’ instead. Finally, while there is a nice simplicity to this statement, and they have given an insight into their own thinking, it would have been useful to provide a few more examples of higher-level reading and engagement with archaeology and / or anthropology. ‘Watching the English’, for instance, is relevant but not pitched for an academic audience; they could reassure the reader further they know what studying these subjects at a high academic level is going to entail.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Relevance of Archaeology:** How do you argue for the relevance of archaeology in understanding our evolving identity, contrary to the view that it is not relevant today?
- **Interpretation of Artifacts:** How does the reclassification of the sculpture at Powys Castle illustrate the impact of provenance and age on cultural and historical significance?
- **Excavation Experience:** What insights did you gain about the role of an archaeologist during your excavation of the Iron Age settlement in Pembrokeshire?
- **Anthropology and Material Culture:** How does studying the context in which objects were made help in understanding a culture, as discussed in Kate Fox’s ‘Watching the English’?
- **Comparative Cultural Practices:** How do the differences in intellectual property rights between ancient Greek culture and modern society illustrate the varying values and beliefs of different societies?

### **Example Three – *Philosophy, University of Cambridge***

Before my A-levels, the subject that I enjoyed most was English. In the sixth form, however, I became frustrated that there seemed to be no way to settle disputes or to find definite answers to my many questions. Instead of a rigorous search for sound first principles, study focused on literary criticism. While the critics’ often conflicting ideas about how diverse topics like psychoanalysis, political theory and racism relate to literature were interesting, I could not see how their arguments could ever be settled. I explained my problem to my English teacher, and he suggested that I start to read Philosophy.

I borrowed the books that he suggested, and before long I had read about Sartre, Barthes and Saussure, and their doctrines: existentialism, structuralism and semiotics. Initially, I enjoyed these authors' aggressive styles, and the challenge of thinking about complex notions like signifiers and signifieds, "en-soi"s and "poursoi" s and the "absurdity of existence". Soon, though, I found that I had the same trouble with these philosophers that I had had with the literary critics: where there were disagreements, for example between existentialists and structuralists over individual freedom, I could not see how to settle them.

When I read the Problems of Philosophy by Bertrand Russell, I saw that there was another way to approach philosophy. Instead of producing a dazzling display of terminology, this author seemed to have tried to avoid technical language entirely. Rather than attack his opponents for being bourgeois or having 'bad faith', he dealt only with their arguments; rather than draw moral and political conclusions from his reasoning, he claimed that Philosophy could do no more than "diminish the risk of error". Most conspicuously, when Russell posed a question he invariably came to a definite conclusion about what its answer was, or whether it could be answered at all. I could see clearly that this type of Philosophy was essentially different from what I had encountered before, and I began to wonder what the distinction might be. I did not have to wait long to find out.

When I read Language, Truth, and Logic by A.J. Ayer, I realised what had been the root of my dissatisfaction with the previous Philosophy and literary criticism that I had read. Their assertions were unverifiable for there were neither tautologies nor predictions about future experiences. No sensory evidence or logical argument could possibly show that they were true or false. If, as Ayer argued, these were the only ways to gain knowledge, then my original problem was solved: all that could be known about literature was what Psychology, Linguistics or other sciences could say. However, recognising this did not inspire me to take up science, but rather to continue investigating Philosophy. I found my curiosity satisfied now that I had found out how to solve my problem, even though I had not found the actual solution. It was the philosophical side of my problem, as opposed to the scientific gathering of data, which had interested me, and convinced me to spend 3 years studying philosophy.

Although I am applying to university primarily because I want to study Philosophy, I hope to enjoy a range of activities. I enjoy drama and debating, and in my spare time I like to write creatively. I recently won joint 1st in the Lloyd Davies Philosophy prize at Oriel College, Oxford. Despite my frustration with English as an academic subject, literature continues to fascinate me, particularly James Joyce and Shakespeare.

Reconciling these time-consuming activities with my work and rowing has made me learn to balance my time; an ability that I hope will help me to function more effectively at university.

## What do we think?

This applicant tells a winding story of their developing relationship to philosophy, and they could have benefitted by reaching their starting point of ‘finding’ the subject more quickly; 8 lines are gone before philosophy makes its first appearance. Moreover, a philosophy admissions tutor may be concerned with the candidate’s frustration around ambiguous answers to questions, since (as they not) this is also common in philosophy. There is a slight ambiguity in the applicant’s apparent acceptance of A.J Ayer’s arguments, and then their return to philosophy away from the sciences; in other words, if the frustration still exists, then why philosophy? This could have been a more interesting and immediate starting point for their personal statement. Nevertheless, this is a refreshing approach to the personal statement, and demonstrates an independent thinker who has seriously considered their decision to pursue philosophy and articulates a mature understanding of what the discipline entails.

## Possible Interview Questions:

- Philosophical Disputes: How can we effectively settle philosophical disagreements, such as those between existentialists and structuralists?
- Verification Principle: What are your thoughts on A.J. Ayer’s verification principle and its implications for the meaningfulness of philosophical statements?
- Russell's Approach: Why do you find Bertrand Russell’s method in "The Problems of Philosophy" more satisfying compared to existentialist and structuralist approaches?
- Limits of Philosophy: What do you consider to be the practical limits of philosophical inquiry, especially in diminishing the risk of error?
- Philosophy and Literature: How can philosophical analysis enhance our understanding of literature, particularly in the works of James Joyce and Shakespeare?

### **Example Four – *Theology and Religion, University of Oxford***

Theology to me is about questions; how did we get here? What is our purpose? Being raised in a religious family I have always had a sense of the centrality of these issues in daily life. As I matured, my academic studies have led me to reflect critically on the practices and beliefs assimilated from my childhood. This has proved extremely rewarding both intellectually and personally, and is something that I believe the academic study of Theology will allow me to continue in a focussed and rigorous way.

The recurrence of religious themes in my academic studies has confirmed my conviction in its global significance and the power of religion to shape cultures through practices and literature. Texts such as TS Eliot’s *The Waste Land* have shown how theological themes can be explored through fiction with the pervading theme of collision of Eastern and Western religion. Further reading, such as *Permission to Believe* by L. Kelemen, has encouraged me to challenge my basic assumptions such as why murder is wrong. The moral issue raised in *The Sunflower* by S. Wiesenthal shows the variety of perspectives possible in addressing a single problem.

My A Level courses provide the basis for further exploration and equip me with a solid foundation in skills required for the study of Theology. English Literature has improved my ability to analyse a text and support an argument. Outside the syllabus, *Paradise Lost* by Milton cemented the links between my course and my interest in Theology. Inspired by my academic interest in RS, I started a Jewish Studies AS Level outside school. History demonstrates how religion has formed the basis for conflict in modern and historical times and helped me to evaluate sources in complex issues involving the original meaning of a text. The sense of a text and nuances of the language can be lost when translated, as in the translation from Hebrew to Greek, Latin to English of the Old Testament. In pursuit of understanding the intended meaning, I am following a translation course in Biblical Hebrew. Mathematics has sharpened my capacity to apply logic to complex questions and condense it into a methodical argument.

To explore Theology and its applications, I arranged work experiences with an Army Chaplain from whom I learned ways to encourage discussion about religion or theological issues, without alienating soldiers or forcing religion upon them. From shadowing a hospital Chaplain, I learned the practical importance of listening in a non-judgemental fashion while dealing with suffering, and the theological implications arising from illness and death. My interpersonal skills and French language were tested when I volunteered at a Destitute Asylum Drop-in Centre, supporting failed asylum seekers. I translated Home Office paperwork into French and formed individual programmes of action. As part of the team I gave emergency supplies of food and clothing. By nature an

organised person, I took on the responsibility of a youth leader at a local centre involving preparation for each session and cooperation with the other leaders. I learned to manage my time to ensure I give sufficient time to school work and extra-curricular activities. I run a debating club encouraging younger girls to debate in a formal structure and set up an inter-school competition. As part of the school orchestra I play the cello and was in the ensemble performing at the Barbican.

The academic study of Theology will be a complementary process, engaging with the world and myself. It is trite but true to say prejudice is founded upon ignorance and fear. My experiences and History study have shown the far-reaching consequences of prejudice. Theology will provide in-depth knowledge to address such issues from an informed and rounded perspective. I feel fired to learn more and find answers to the questions Theology poses, yet each opens more areas of enquiry. At University I will develop techniques to explore this endless process of learning and feed my enthusiasm to resolve the complex questions that Theology encompasses.

## What do we think?

There is a high level of evidence of motivation in this statement, from taking up a Jewish Studies AS outside of school, to learning biblical Hebrew, to arranging work experience with an army chaplain. This candidate is clearly intellectually curious, pursuing further reading beyond A Level content across several A levels. However, they could have made this statement more focused and leaner by cutting any details that could be inferred elsewhere – for instance, they already know they are studying English literature and History A Levels and are aware what those courses entail – and giving more detail on their engagement with theology-specific readings and ideas. The second half of the statement, from ‘To explore Theology and...’, could do with more focus on academic content. Referencing more academic resources and ideas in relation to their experiences – for instance, on Theodicy, relating to their work with the chaplain – would have made this large section more effective. Overall, though the statement is light on theology-relevant readings, it paints a vivid picture of the applicant, and demonstrates a strong interest in some key themes they will go on to study.



## Possible Interview Questions:

- **Critical Reflection on Beliefs:** How has critically reflecting on the religious practices and beliefs from your childhood influenced your understanding of theology?
- **Theological Themes in Literature:** What insights have you gained from exploring theological themes in texts like T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Milton's "Paradise Lost"?
- **Translation and Meaning:** How do you approach the challenges of understanding the intended meaning of religious texts, considering the nuances lost in translation from Hebrew to Greek and Latin to English?
- **Practical Theology:** What have your work experiences with an Army Chaplain and a hospital Chaplain taught you about the practical applications of theology in real-life situations?
- **Interdisciplinary Skills:** How have your studies in subjects like History and Mathematics equipped you with the skills necessary to pursue theology at an academic level?

### **Example Five – Classical Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Oxford**

Growing up on the site of a Roman bath and villa first cultivated my curiosity with all things ancient. I developed my fascination for ancient history however after the archaeologists of 'Time Team,' excavated the Roman villa, that had seemed previously nothing more than an unremarkable field. The everyday artefacts unearthed captivated me, giving life to the people and society in which they were created. I've since developed a strong interest in the political and religious workings of antiquity, for so much of my culture is fundamentally embedded in Greek and Roman traditions.

Recently I have been researching the contrasts of the life of the Greek hetairai with that of the respectable housewife in the classical period. I was interested to discover that the intellectual opportunities and financial independence that could be obtained by the courtesan were unrivalled by any other class of woman in classical antiquity. I am eager to bring this aspect of ancient Greek society to the fore in my classics society, with one of my favourite hobbies being debating. My ability to discuss, analytically, aspects of

antiquity and my willingness to go beyond the curriculum, resulted in my winning the school prize for Classical Civilisation in 2020.

Last summer I was fortunate enough to fulfil an ambition to visit Delphi. I found the site captivating and although observing ancient artefacts in the British museum and Roman museum in Gloucestershire had increased my fascination with ancient history, a site as historically and religiously significant as Delphi demonstrated to me that the archaeological remains of the ancient world are as fascinating on their own as the history that accompanies them. Although I have not had the opportunity to study in school the material remains of antiquity, I am now eager to develop archaeological experience and knowledge. The remains of the theatre at Delphi in particular had a significant effect on me. This was not only due to the monumental scale of the theatre but also the link between the theatre and the religion it exemplifies. I find the concept of theatre, both crude and tragic, being conducted in dedication to a god, of notable interest due to the lack of comparison one finds in contemporary society.

When studying Knights and Archarnians, I was struck most profoundly by the fact that much of the comic performance is not conveyed by the text itself. Our knowledge of aspects of the productions such as the costumes and masks has been gained from material remains and it is this that allows us to envisage what the performance would have been like, rather than reading the plays as a text alone. I find such knowledge from archaeological discovery is what allows the plays to come alive and be appreciated the way the poets intended them to be.

As a dressage rider who has competed for England previously, I have been very interested in the equestrian links between antiquity and contemporary society. The fact that the chariot race was the only event at which women could compete in Ancient Greece, albeit indirectly, interests me, for through literature such as the Iliad the impression was made on me that the chariot would be a symbol of male power and dominance on the battle field. It is the strict discipline and control of the charioteer however, reflected in the sculpture of the Delphi charioteer that leads me to compare it with my own sport. For such discipline and composure are two of the most important qualities of a successful dressage rider.

Although I have only studied Greek topics in Classical Civilisation, I would relish the opportunity, not only to continue my learning of ancient Greek society but also to discover the Roman world, which, I have started to unearth with my study of the Aeneid at school, and would ultimately satisfy my fascination for the classical world which began with my childhood above a Roman villa.

## What do we think?

This is a very strong statement, written with a good understanding of audience (academics, passionate about their subject matter). By focusing strongly on their interests and exploration of relevant topics, rather than extraneous material on extracurriculars or A Levels, this statement indicates an applicant who would thoroughly suit the Oxbridge system. They keenly focus on academic resources and ideas throughout, while managing to make personal links to texts and concepts they have encountered. Their equestrian experience, for example, sets a backdrop for their mention of gender in Ancient Greece. Finally, they bring a sense of cohesion to their statement by including the site of the Roman villa from their childhood home in the introduction and conclusion. The focus of this statement to suit the Oxford course may force them to be fairly specific with their choices of university courses elsewhere, but apart from that consideration, there is little we would advise to change.

## Possible Interview Questions:

- **Archaeological Impact:** How did the excavation of the Roman villa by 'Time Team' influence your understanding of how everyday artefacts can bring ancient societies to life?
- **Hetairai vs. Housewife:** What insights have you gained about the roles and opportunities for women in classical antiquity from your research on Greek hetairai and respectable housewives?
- **Delphi Visit:** How did your visit to Delphi enhance your appreciation of the historical and religious significance of ancient archaeological sites compared to studying artefacts in a museum?
- **Theatre and Religion:** In what ways do you find the relationship between ancient Greek theatre and religion unique, and how does this influence your understanding of ancient performances?
- **Equestrian Links:** How do you see the parallels between ancient chariot racing and modern dressage, and what do these comparisons reveal about discipline and composure in both sports?

# The Arts

## **Example One – *History of Art, University of Oxford***

My practical study of Art, and in particular photography, has broadened my knowledge of the freedom and restrictions of the creator. I am interested in how things are made, and why they were made at that time. My naturally inquisitive spirit, combined with a love of the visual arts, has convinced me to study History of Art at university level.

A desire to experience works of art first hand and in their specific cultural context has led me to travel, allowing me to explore links between art works and their social surroundings. When in Mali, I was struck by the monumental mud mosque of Djenné. The scale, unfamiliar form, and texture of the vernacular building material gave the architecture a unique identity. In my view, a pictorial reproduction of the mosque would not be able to recreate such a powerful viewing experience. After making my own camera and experimenting in the development of the prints, I have begun to question the thought-provoking relationship between art works and their reproductions. Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' addresses this issue, one which I have realised continually presents new challenges within the art world, particularly with the growth of digital media.

I was captivated by the variety of methodologies discussed in 'Art and its Histories' by Steve Edwards, specifically the debate surrounding the canon and the artists it favours. When I visited the Twombly and Poussin exhibition at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, I questioned the place of contemporary artists within the canon. This contrast has led me to wonder how, when and why such an inflexible dogma (a 'category of corruption', as E.H Gombrich ironically describes it) originated, and to re-examine the values upon which it was founded.

The compatibility of my A-level subjects allows me to approach art works from different angles. A-Levels in Spanish and French enable me to read primary sources in their original language. Parallel to my studies of Impressionism, I was able independently to read Baudelaire's 'Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne'. The text shed light on Parisian life of the period and added a new dimension to my understanding of the movement. Additionally, I hope to learn Italian while studying the High Renaissance at the British Institute in Florence during my Gap Year.

I like to read contemporary articles in the V&A magazine, the arts sections of

newspapers and Tate ETC., in which I discovered Christopher Turner's article 'The Deliberate Accident in Art'. It prompted me to explore how artists have manipulated their mistakes to aid the creative process. Having visited Wolfgang Tillmans' exhibition at the Serpentine gallery, I am also curious to learn more about the modern-day role of the curator. The non-conventional display of photographs demonstrated the strong influence of the exhibition space on the viewer's perception of the work: some prints were simply taped to the white-washed walls. The book 'But is it Art?' by Cynthia Freeland similarly emphasises the degree to which our viewing experience may be altered by the context in which Art is viewed.

My work experience at Frith Street Gallery, Soho, gave me an understanding of contemporary cultures of display. I hope to further this knowledge as an intern at the Piper Gallery this winter. I am also excited at the prospect of learning about the art market during my internship in the Impressionist department of Sotheby's in the autumn.

As Deputy Head Girl, I wrote and led whole-school assemblies on topics such as the origin of Aesthetics, and took pleasure in public speaking. I have achieved Grade 8 Oboe and Grade 8 Singing and was an active member of all school orchestras and choirs. I was an eager journalist for the school website, photographing and writing about events. I think that all this shows that I am a determined and adventurous student, and I am extremely excited about studying History of Art at degree level.

## **What do we think?**

This is a confident statement that showcases unique personal interests, whilst keeping the register squarely academic. Reading is used to good effect, highlighting points and observations made by the student, rather than simply being listed or described. The impact of this is that the student feels active rather than passive in their academic exploration. Explicitly mentioning one's A-level subjects can often feel stilted and unnecessary, but in this case the student gets away with it as they've referenced specific texts and movements rather than generic transferrable skills. However, they probably didn't need to spell out the compatibility of their subjects, and could have instead used more space to engage with impressionism itself; the principle of 'show, don't tell'. To improve the overall flow and coherence, we would recommend reducing the number of paragraphs, and instead grouping some of the latter content together.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Art and Reproduction:** How do you interpret Walter Benjamin's views on the relationship between original artworks and their reproductions, especially in the context of digital media?
- **Canon in Art History:** What are your thoughts on the formation and critique of the artistic canon, as discussed by Steve Edwards and E.H. Gombrich?
- **Cultural Contexts:** How did your visit to the Djenne mud mosque in Mali influence your understanding of the relationship between art and its cultural context?
- **Contemporary Curation:** How did Wolfgang Tillmans' exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery shape your views on the role of the curator and the influence of exhibition spaces on art perception?
- **Interdisciplinary Approaches:** How do your language skills in Spanish and French enhance your study of art history, and what insights did you gain from reading Baudelaire's 'Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne' in the original French?

### **Example Two – Music, University of Cambridge**

The relationship between the performer's interpretation of a work and the influence of the composer's life and character on the work intrigues me. I have enjoyed lecture-recitals which have explored this relationship, such as Andreas Schiff's discussion and performance of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, and a lecture by Alfred Brendel that touched upon the need for performers to be aware of the 'psychological components' in Beethoven's music.

Performers, in seeking to extend their repertoire, are turning to lesser known composers with a new-found appreciation. This is paralleled in academic circles with the limelight cast on differing approaches to scholarship. One composer who I have independently researched is Fanny Mendelssohn. Reading comment on feminist musicology by scholars such as Suzanne Cusick and Susan McClary has impacted on my attitude toward music analysis and the study of music history. Cusick's delineation of the supposed division between the creative and scientific aspects of composition has particularly interested me. My research thus far has provided me with fresh insights that go beyond the A level syllabus.

I am keen to develop as a composer; together with my study of Fanny Mendelssohn and Romantic music, I composed a string quartet in an early Romantic style. I have since been drawn to later works when exploring my own compositional voice. Presently, I am listening to works with a strong narrative element, such as Mussorgsky's 'Night on a Bare Mountain', Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony, Richard Strauss' 'Death and Transfiguration' and Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'. These pieces have all inspired my current composition, a programmatic piece depicting the events of 9/11. I have an eclectic taste in music that includes popular styles and I enjoy creating pieces as a singer-songwriter for the guitar and piano.

Music is an art for both the individual and the group. I have experienced both of these as I began with the piano and subsequently played in groups when I chose to learn the violin. This has enabled me to take part in the orchestra and ensembles at school. I also joined 'The Voices Foundation' and my school's selective choir and consort group. More recently, I attended an Eton Choral Course which confirmed my passion for working with other musicians, and I had the opportunity to perform one of my compositions. Additionally, I won the first Open School Arts competition performing several of my own compositions and I also won 'Best Junior Soloist' in 2007 and 'Best Senior Performer' this year in our inter-house music competition. I have performed in numerous venues including the Purcell Room, St James' Palace, the Royal College and the Royal Academy of Music. As House Music Captain I am responsible for directing my house choir and two ensembles and last year I organised a fundraising concert for Tom's Trust. I believe that music is essential to the development of identity and was an important part of my curriculum. Artis Education, a charity for which I worked, also adheres to this belief as it promotes music in schools by inspiring creativity in education.

My limited experience of conducting thus far has confirmed my belief that conductors face the challenge of imparting their interpretation of the music to the performers. One conductor whose performances I have attended both in London and St Petersburg is Valery Gergiev. I found his style fascinating and that stimulated me to try conducting for myself, which I did on the Eton Choral Course, conducting Locus Iste by Bruckner. It became evident to me that the conductor plays a pivotal role which requires an in-depth study of the work.

I am keen on performing, composing and my academic studies and believe that the combination of these is what makes the study of music so diverse and exhilarating. It is for this reason that I want to study music at university where I intend to immerse myself in the musical scene while pursuing a rigorous academic course.



## What do we think?

This is a strong statement from a clearly very capable student. They hold together different aspects of the music course and highlight different skills, but wisely lead with the more academic content. In places they could adopt more of a ‘show, don’t tell’ approach; for example, the last sentence of the second paragraph isn’t necessary, and could be replaced by further analysis and reflection that actually proves the insight they are seeking to highlight. The paragraph on their performance experience could also be trimmed down slightly (for example, they probably don’t need to mention all the venues they’ve performed at), again to make space for more academic engagement. To further refine the statement, we might suggest that the student replace statements of facts about the subject (music is... performers are...) with statements that frame themselves as the subject (I’ve been struck by... I’m curious about... I questioned whether...).

## Possible Interview Questions:

- **Performer-Composer Relationship:** How do you see the relationship between a performer's interpretation of a work and the influence of the composer's life and character, as discussed in the lectures by Andreas Schiff and Alfred Brendel?
- **Feminist Musicology:** What insights have you gained from your research on Fanny Mendelssohn and the feminist musicology perspectives of scholars like Suzanne Cusick and Susan McClary?
- **Compositional Voice:** How have works with strong narrative elements, such as Mussorgsky’s ‘Night on a Bare Mountain’ and Stravinsky’s ‘Rite of Spring,’ influenced your own compositional style?
- **Conducting Experience:** What did you learn from your experience conducting Bruckner’s *Locus Iste* on the Eton Choral Course, and how has Valery Gergiev's conducting style influenced you?
- **Integration of Music:** How do you balance and integrate your interests in performing, composing, and academic studies within your musical education and future aspirations?

### **Example Three – Music, University of Oxford**

‘Sometimes, the opposite is also true’. This remark, on the 1790 manuscript of Beethoven’s ‘Klage’, has absorbed me as I explore the depth of music, where many debates remain unresolved. It is said that music expresses the inexpressible. E.T.A. Hoffmann, Beethoven’s contemporary, revered the composer as the first to realise absolute music in its greatest depth, transcending the power of language to express the infinite and phenomenal. This ideal of the sublime was popular amongst the Romantics, yet I find myself asking, ‘How can mere mortals create art which expresses the infinite?’

My interest was sparked by ‘The Sublime Beethoven’ by Dmitri Tymoczko, a twenty-first century music theorist who looks beyond the “caricature Beethoven” within Romanticism. He contradicts Hoffmann’s view that Beethoven’s music can express the infinite, by relating the limitations of Beethoven’s piano to those of musical expression. In the first movement of the ‘Tempest’ sonata, the second theme in the recapitulation (now a fourth higher) is constrained by the narrow range of Beethoven’s piano. Tymoczko suggests that in this, Beethoven intended to expose the inadequacies of music itself. Referring to sublimity as the realisation of human inadequacies on perception of the phenomenal, he concludes that Beethoven’s music is indeed sublime, in that it acknowledges its own limitations.

The influence of the critics such as Hoffmann increased as Beethoven’s music became less comprehensible to his audience. Aspects seen as aesthetically displeasing were explained by critics as an expression of the sublime; his music was not meant to be enjoyable but awe-inspiring. This concept encouraged people to seek metaphysical insight through music rather than mere pleasure. This was responsible for the growing influence of the composer over his audience during the nineteenth century, leading to the upheaval of the listener-performer-composer pyramid.

Significantly, it is ever more necessary to promote the role of interpreter as the repertoire has become more standardised and contemporary performance traditions have drifted further from us. I find that the study of music and performance itself are inextricably linked, so the idea that the performer’s priority is to be a “communicator to the present” (Raymond Leppard, ‘Authenticity in Music’) has greatly influenced my playing. Leadership is crucial in ensembles, as I have learned from the role of leader of the school symphony and chamber orchestras, as well as a string quartet. It is important for us to interact and translate the score into music relevant to audiences today. When playing in an ensemble at my local church I enjoy the group dynamic of playing by ear, arguably requiring even more intercommunication. The freedom it offers

is a privilege I also had at the London Organ Improvisation Course (LOIC). After these experiences, I hope to convey the same freshness even when playing from a score. Without considering the different values that critics, composers, performers and audiences have held through history, the study of music would be one-sided. Hoffmann was reflecting popular sentiment in his writing, and while I agree that we can question/review his ideas today, we must remember that we ourselves cannot avoid the influence of our own time. This can be seen in attempts to address music on a level which more relates to today's society, such as in the BBC Music Magazine, where I look forward to doing work experience. As well as wider reading, I attended lectures by Professors John Deathridge and Robin Stowell in research for the Fitzwilliam college music essay competition. I feel that my independent research outside the A level syllabus and my Sixth-Form Academic and Music Scholarships have prepared me for the rigours of an intensive academic course.

The more I discover about music, the more it pushes me to challenge widely held assumptions. Certain Beethoven works contain evidence of doubt – such as the strings' faltering statement of the theme in the 'Ode to Joy' – that highlight our limited perspective and can prove that 'sometimes, the opposite is also true'.

## **What do we think?**

This statement is clearly written by a thoughtful and very intelligent student. The material and ideas they are referencing to are high-level, but the framing slightly suffers from what we might call 'essay mode'. This is often seen in the most capable students, where they will end up describing an idea or book at length and forget to keep themselves at the centre. You can see this especially in the second and third paragraphs, in which the student barely mentions themselves at all. We would want to reframe these sections so that the reader is learning about the student through the way they engage with the content, rather than being told about the content. Remember- admissions tutors already know about their subject, and, in many cases, you may also be submitting essays. The personal statement is about you! Nevertheless this sort of draft can normally be tweaked into an excellent statement without too much effort, since the evidence of academic ability is there.

## **Possible Interview Questions:**

- Sublime in Music: How do you reconcile Hoffmann's view of Beethoven's music as expressing the infinite with Tymoczko's interpretation of Beethoven exposing music's limitations?

- **Critics' Influence:** In what ways did the increasing influence of critics like Hoffmann shape the perception of Beethoven's music as awe-inspiring rather than purely pleasurable?
- **Interpreter's Role:** How do you see the role of the performer as a "communicator to the present," and how has this influenced your approach to playing in ensembles?
- **Historical Context:** Why is it important to consider the historical values of critics, composers, performers, and audiences when studying music, and how does this context influence modern interpretations?
- **Challenging Assumptions:** What are some examples of how Beethoven's works, such as the strings' faltering statement in the 'Ode to Joy,' challenge widely held assumptions about music, and what do they reveal about our limited perspective?

### **Example Four – Architecture, University of Cambridge**

Architecture is public art with an enormous potential to transform people's quality of life and this is what I want to do. I disagree with people who suggest that architecture merely combines art and maths. While it's both logical and creative, it's also a reflection of society, including politics, sociology and art history. Designing a building involves consideration beyond drawing the exterior. You must think about the internal experience. It is the moods and environment buildings create which matter; they can instil peace in places of sadness, beauty in places of despair.

The thought of seeing a building going up which I've spent years designing, which will benefit future generations and improve society, thrills me. I chose to do my EPQ around what I believe to be the pre-eminent challenge for architects today. My title is 'A design for a residential building to tackle the housing crisis and to meet the needs of ever growing cities', the challenge being to combine space efficiency with aesthetics and affordability. The project has allowed me to explore existing ideas, from designs involving modern day technology such as prefabrication, to Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation. It embodies his famous concept of "the house is a machine for living in" and the idea of a strong community being vital for the success of a building. I'm fascinated by the role of architecture in building communities and its social impacts. I chose to write my art personal study on Trellick Tower as I admire brutalist architecture but most of all because of the dramatic controversy it caused. Erno Goldfinger attempted to create a space for a community where people could live together in

harmony. I wish he could see how, despite problems in its early years, it has now become such an iconic London landmark.

I discovered the importance of future-proof buildings while reading for my EPQ. My favourite example of an adaptable building is the Pompidou Centre, which I wrote about in our student run magazine and presented for the ARTiculation prize. Rogers and Piano's design includes fixed elements on the corners so the inner space can be altered. This is particularly important for a museum which needs to respond to changes in trends. The 'flexible container' rebranded the area and crime was reduced. It's a building which caused controversy, the locals accused it of 'ruining Paris', but it eventually proved successful. Norman Foster is another who is conscious of the needs for the future. In the talk I attended he said he's 'informed by the past, designing in the present, looking to the future', which demonstrates how buildings must be prepared to accommodate change.

My dream to become an architect has solidified through my work experience with Hamiltons Architects and EPR Architects. There I learnt that the architect's job is not solitary and requires constant engagement with others such as engineers and to build on their ideas. At EPR, I was working on a design for an extension for my house. I learnt about drawing inspiration from your surroundings when designing, and how every design should start with sketching. The EPR architects were very complimentary of my design, encouraging me towards a career in architecture. I also attended a course at the Bartlett School of Architecture this summer. The brief was to create something which would enhance one sense but constrain others. My group made a dancer's dress designed to enhance one's sense of sight. It consisted of tubes of coloured water running round the body of the dancer and spraying onto the floor, meaning that the performance was recorded by the way the colour fell. I was awarded a prize for exceptional leadership and work. Architecture is something I care deeply about. Given the chance to study it, I would explore how people's lives can be improved through architecture, and how we can design buildings ready to meet the needs of the future. I'm determined to leave a mark on the world for the better.

## **What do we think?**

This statement strikes quite a personal note; you can really feel the student's genuine commitment, which is great. There is also a coherent overall theme, that of improving people's lives. The student really makes use of their EPQ, not just mentioning it or summarising the conclusion, but engaging with the texts and ideas they came across. This is worth thinking about if you're doing an EPQ, since the

research you did will be really valuable. In places their syntax and grammar could be improved a bit (see the first sentence as an example), though they convey their points successfully overall. A review of this draft could tighten it up a bit, just to make sure the points come across really clearly and every sentence is being used to full effect.

### **Possible Interview Questions:**

- **Architecture and Society:** How do you view the role of architecture in reflecting and influencing societal aspects such as politics, sociology, and art history?
- **Housing Crisis Solution:** What innovative ideas did you explore in your EPQ on designing a residential building to tackle the housing crisis, and how do you balance space efficiency, aesthetics, and affordability?
- **Future-Proof Buildings:** Why do you consider future-proofing buildings important, and where have you observed this other than in the Pompidou centre?
- **Architectural Controversy:** How do you interpret the initial controversy and eventual success of buildings like Trellick Tower and the Pompidou Centre in the context of architectural impact on communities?
- **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Based on your work experience with Hamiltons Architects and EPR Architects, what have you learned about the conflict between theory and pragmatism in the design process?

### **Example Five – *History of Art, University of Cambridge***

As an Art Scholar I have developed an acute visual understanding and deep appreciation for the creative process; vital attributes in my desire to study art history. Creating my own work has led me both to question why historically there have been so few women artists and why those who rose to prominence, such as Judith Leyster, were marginalised. To gain a range of perspectives, I read Linda Nochlin's *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, and Griselda Pollock's *Vision and Difference*. Unconvinced by Nochlin's narrow argument, I was interested in the latter's view –the historical use of 'genius' almost exclusively toward the male gender prevented women from gaining renown. Interning at the Marlborough Gallery, Monaco, made me realise women's marginalisation is not purely a thing of the past - all the gallery's solo exhibitions in the past year were by male artists. Additionally, I gained valuable experience of curating, a

career in which I am particularly interested in, and learnt the extent to which our perception of images is shaped by their positional relationships.

I am fascinated by aesthetic discord and how the concept of beauty has been challenged. Pre-Raphaelitism, exemplified by Rossetti's *The Day Dream*, embodies this discord in its synthesis of the androgynous with an undercurrent of erotic longing. I am interested in the images interpretation of the link between women and nature, again Rossetti breaks with convention; the *Day Dream*'s creeping vines are more 'green with envy' than traditional, fertile Arcadian landscapes.

Watching Roger Scruton's documentary '*Why Beauty Matters*' I came across Michel Craig Martin's view that the purpose of art '*is to see the world of here and now*'. I am intrigued by the juxtaposing ways contemporary art and advertising interpret the '*here and now*' in their conceptions of beauty. During my work experience at BBH, an advertising agency, I was struck by the emphasis placed on classical visual ideals. Fascinated, I read John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and attended a lecture by Dr Nigel Spivey on the classical body. Through comparing Michelangelo's David and David Beckham's modelling, Spivey proved the close relationship between the demands of '*here and now*' and those of previous centuries.

I believe that contemporary art has a broader purpose than advertising as it is at liberty to challenge the viewer's perception. However, in Robert Hughes' *The Shock of the New*, he argues that in current society the function of art is as investment capital rather than moral influence. At first dismayed by this cynicism, visiting the V&A's '*Treasures of the Royal Court*' exhibition lead me to see the historic significance of art's financial power. Studying pieces such as the *Barbour Jewel*, I realized that art has always been used to convey status, wealth, and learning. My work experience at an auction house furthered my interest by showing me art's academic implications collide with financial imperatives.

Another way I have expressed my interest is through debating; I have competed in a number of inter- school competitions and was made 'Head of Debating' after defeating the motion '*In times of economic hardship it is right to cut funding for the arts*'. I have also established a Junior Art History society and been appointed the school's Art History Prefect, aiming to promote discussion and awareness. My aesthetic interests are reflected through my participation in music and drama, designing costumes for school plays and touring Europe's cathedrals with a chamber choir, where I experienced the synthesis of art, music and religion. I am enthralled by the analysis of objects and the



rich cultural history surrounding them. An art history degree would grant me the time and depth to profoundly engage with discipline.

## What do we think?

This student artfully (pun not intended) weaves together textual engagement with practical experiences, bringing these academic concepts to life – for example, in paragraph four. They maintain a strong, confident tone throughout. The statement would benefit from a bit more of an introduction to tie together some of the themes in the statement, presenting a brief account of why art history is so interesting to them. It's often easier to write introductions last, when you can reflect on what you've said. Jumping straight into a particular topic, like the student has done here, is an indication that they have lots to write about and want to fit it all in. This is certainly a good problem to have, but it's worth assessing the overall structure to make sure you're showing off that great content to best effect. This might mean editing the statement to make it more succinct overall, or perhaps trimming the extracurriculars paragraph. Small tweaks can make a big impact to the overall readability and the impression you leave.

## Possible Interview Questions:

- **Women's Marginalisation:** How do you reconcile Nochlin's and Pollock's views on women's marginalisation in art, and what did you observe at the Marlborough Gallery?
- **Aesthetic Discord:** What does Rossetti's "The Day Dream" reveal about challenging traditional beauty in Pre-Raphaelite art?
- **Art vs. Advertising:** How do contemporary art and advertising differently reflect the 'here and now'?
- **Art's Function:** Do you agree with Robert Hughes that art serves more as investment capital than moral influence today, and why?
- **Financial Power of Art:** How do pieces like the Barbour Jewel demonstrate the financial power and status conveyed by art historically?

We hope you found this resource  
useful!

Feel welcome to contact us should  
you want to discuss your individual  
situation.

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