

Preparing for Study at Oxford: Notes for Freshers at Somerville College October 2026

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Introduction

These notes are intended to give you an idea of how to approach your studies at Oxford. They are not intended to answer every question, nor are they a 'universal study plan'. Part of the challenge of undertaking study at any University is learning to manage your own time to fit the individual demands of your course of study. It is important that you work as effectively as possible to achieve the best academic results you can. Please bear in mind that the approaches to study which may have served you well up to now are not necessarily the best techniques to continue to use for the academic challenges that lie ahead so do experiment with new approaches to find a way of studying that works for you at this more demanding level. The notes that follow give some information about the types of tuition you will receive, about ways of approaching the work that will be expected of you, and about sources of support.

Your Faculty or Department may also provide introductory sessions or materials on approaches to study; the material provided here is meant to supplement, not replace, the information you will have access to in your own field, which will be carefully tailored to reflect the demands of your particular course.

Valuable information for all students on all aspects of college life, not just academic, is available from the [Somerville College website](#). You should also consult the [Current Students](#) section of the University website. In addition, before you arrive at Somerville, you should look at the College Handbook (see link on [College Policies - Somerville College Oxford](#)) which sets out various College Rules and Regulations.

Teaching and tutorials

At Oxford you have both lectures and tutorials. While tutorials are the responsibility of Colleges, the various faculties and departments of the University organize lectures. Your lecture timetable will be available online once you arrive in freshers' week and you will be told how to locate it by your department or Faculty.

How will my tuition be organized?

Tutorials (or 'tutes') provide the focus of learning at Oxford, and will be described in more detail below. In general terms, all undergraduates have one or more tutorials each week for the eight weeks of the teaching term. The individual attention, feedback and contact time provided in these sessions are a large part of what makes an Oxford education so special.

These are the formal elements of your timetable; most of your working time, however, especially for those working in the Social Sciences or Humanities, will be spent in independent study, preparing for your tutorials and classes.

What happens in a tutorial?

A time and place for your first tutorial will be arranged when you meet your tutor for the first time in Freshers' Week. The tutorial will usually be held in the tutor's office or study in College, or it may take place in their departmental office. You will probably be given a reading list and a subject for your first essay or, in the case of scientists, a set of problems to prepare for working over in the tutorial.

In a tutorial, you will meet with your tutor, usually in a small group of not more than two or three undergraduates, and consider work that is then discussed with your tutor and your tutorial partner(s). Most tutors ask you to hand your work in at a prescribed time before the tutorial, and will then read it beforehand, discuss it with you during the tutorial and hand it back to you at the time, perhaps with feedback written on the work, although the most valuable feedback you receive will come through the tutorial discussion itself. To make the most of this opportunity, it is important that you make sure you submit your work on time. The importance of the tutorial submission is such that some tutors adopt a policy whereby tutees who have not submitted their work on time are not allowed to attend the corresponding tutorial. In the case of an essay, you may be asked in the tutorial to summarize the arguments in it for your tutor and tutorial partner, or you may be asked to read it out in the tutorial. In the case of a set of problems, you will be expected to be able to explain your answers to your tutor. A tutorial will normally last about one hour.

Tutorials are not intended to be 'mini lectures', nor do they try to cover all the topics that might come up on an examination paper. Rather, the main aim of tutorials is to require you to think actively about the material covered, dealing with the issues in a constructive and critical way through explaining your ideas to your tutor.

A tutorial will help both you and your tutor to assess how far you have mastered the work assigned to you; it will help you to solve difficulties that have arisen in the course of that work, consolidate your understanding of the material, and it should offer guidance on future progress. The tutorial system is the most flexible method of teaching. The interaction between student and tutor is intended to make clear what the student already understands, and allow the tutor to help the student further their understanding by clarifying issues and encouraging further reflection. In short, it forms the framework of your study.

It is worth noting that each tutorial is focused on providing feedback to the tutee or tutees on their work and academic progress. This is one of the great benefits offered at Oxford and constitutes a richness and scale of feedback to students that far exceeds that available at most universities.

How can I get the most from a tutorial?

Not every tutorial is the same; the form it will take will vary from subject to subject and from tutor to tutor. Presenting your work in a tutorial can be daunting at first, but it is an excellent way of judging whether an argument really stands up, or whether you fully

understand the answer to a problem or the method that you used to solve it. You will get the most out of your tutorials, and enjoy them most fully, if you follow these guidelines:

Do enough work and more in preparation — otherwise, you won't get the points made in discussion or understand the solution to problems, and you won't be able to participate actively, and contribute to the discussions.

Pluck up courage to put forward your own views! Tutorials are about the exchange of ideas and tutors are not there to lecture you, or to entertain you! Stand up for your own ideas. Tutors enjoy debate, and they won't be offended if you disagree with them. They will expect you to explain carefully your reasons for doing so. Also be prepared to argue and discuss with your tutorial partner(s) inside and outside the tutorial — you can learn a lot from one another.

Use tutorials to get your questions answered and don't be afraid to reveal your ignorance! Tutors will not expect you to understand perfectly the complexities of everything you have read whilst preparing for a tutorial – if you could understand everything yourself, the tutorials would be irrelevant. If you come across something that you do not understand, make a note of it and use your tutorial time to ask about it.

Make some notes but don't spend the whole tutorial taking notes! The tutorial is meant to be a conversation between tutor and tutees. It may be helpful for you, when you go back to your essays or problems for revision, to have some record of the course the discussion took, but don't let this take up the entire time. Don't let writing get in the way of thinking or talking. For instance, you could note down headings, and then after the tutorial fill in more details — do this soon afterwards or else you will forget. Ask your tutor for advice if you are uncertain about the type of notes to take.

Work with your fellow tutees before and after tutorials. Discuss that week's topic with your colleagues before the tutorial. You can learn a lot from each other. Have a de-brief with your tutorial partner(s) while the tutorial is fresh in the mind so that you can clarify things while you still remember what was said.

Preparing for a tutorial

So, you have been given a topic and a reading list for your first essay, or a set of problems to work through.

Now what?

If you have a problem sheet to answer, you will need to identify suitable textbooks and/or lecture notes covering the topic and aim to understand the relevant scientific/mathematical principles before attempting to answer the questions. Discussing the topic with other students in your course year is an excellent start for developing your initial understanding before then answering the questions on your own.

If you have an essay to write you will need to work your way through the reading list which your tutor will have given you, find the books and other resources (your library

induction will help with this), take notes from what you read to refer to in writing your essay, attend the complementary lectures, and, of course, you'll need to find the time to write up your work by the deadline set by your tutor. All this must happen by the deadline for submission set by your tutor, usually within a week or less, and in parallel with any other lectures, classes or practicals that you must attend. Planning your time will be very important, as will planning your work. Before you launch into reading for your essay, take some time to think about the topic or question that you have been set, so that you understand what it is aimed at establishing. Try to put together a rough outline or skeleton structure for the essay, including the question you are answering and how you are answering it. This will help you to focus during your reading, and will help define your approach to taking notes. Discussions with your fellow students over the week can also help develop understanding and argument.

Approaches to reading

It is easy to feel a little overwhelmed by the size of some of the reading lists you are given — but don't be, and don't be afraid to ask your tutor to indicate priorities on the lists, or to comment on them. Although their functions may differ (check with your tutor), as a general rule, reading lists aim to give you all the background information you might want, not everything that it is necessary to read to do well in your course. ***It is more important to choose wisely what to read, and to read intelligently, than it is to read a lot.*** Often it is quite impossible to read everything, and it would not be productive to do so. Instead, you may find it useful to 'skim' through a number of texts first to get an idea of how much information of relevance they contain, and then select a smaller number from which to work. Equally, don't just take the first book on the reading list back to your room and assume that it will suffice. Some material will be vital; further reading will expand the subject, and lead you to think in new ways about it. Learn to tell the difference. ***Get into the habit of using books as tools: select what you need to read, using the index, list of contents, preface or introduction – and if you are uncertain about the relevance or use of a particular text, ask your tutor, even before you start reading it.*** Different books cover the same topics in different ways — you may find one author clearer than another, so look through several textbooks (if there is a choice) when trying to understand a topic. It is worth browsing along the shelves in libraries to get some idea of what is available.

Don't forget that the Librarians are experts in helping you to locate the items that can help you in the Library. Oxford has a wide range of libraries, in addition to the College Library, to which you will be introduced during your first week. Attitudes to books vary amongst subjects; for instance, lawyers need advice about reading cases and using casebooks; English students need a clear sense of primary and secondary sources; science students need texts that will cover the relevant material. Get used to classifying books as to their functions; this will define the way that you use them. For instance, material relating to arguments or theories needs to be read fully and understood, whilst a source of information is best used by looking at the index to find what you seek. Different types of reading matter need to be read at different speeds: a high-powered article might be worth spending a whole morning on, whereas in some subjects even a fat book can be perused in half an hour. If you have a particularly difficult piece to tackle, you may need to read it more than once — first to get the gist,

and then more closely to get the answers to the specific questions you have in mind. You may find it helps to go back and read a simpler text as an introduction. **Reading is about what you take in, NOT the volume of pages you get through.** If you get too tired or too bored, take a break and return to the task refreshed and effective.

Of course, for most people, note taking is an important part of the reading process. Making good notes will help you to write a good essay, or to understand a particular topic, and will give you something to refer back to during revision, but they are not an end in themselves. Do not forget that the essay question or topic should be the main criterion and focus for what is noteworthy; ***your notes should be targeted at the main points raised by the question.*** As you read, divisions and sub-themes of the overall question will emerge — note them down. They will both help with the topic in hand and provide additional points to take into account when revising later on. To help with revision, make sure you include page numbers and footnote numbers as necessary, so that you can find the information again easily later on.

Don't forget to make a note of ideas that come to you in the course of your reading — even if they are not directly relevant to that week's work, they may be valuable as part of the general understanding that you are building up about that area of your subject. Remember to acknowledge the ideas of others on which you draw and avoid **plagiarism**. Some very useful advice on this topic is available at the [University's plagiarism website](#) but a key point is that your notes must clearly distinguish between text which represents your own thoughts in your own words and text which is drawn directly from your reading and must be subsequently explicitly acknowledged as such if incorporated into your writing. **It is important to note that incorporating output from an artificial intelligence engine as if you had written it is a form of plagiarism and completely unacceptable.**

However, avoid taking notes that are almost as long as the original — you are probably wasting time and not really selecting and digesting the material sufficiently. Notes should only contain the bare bones of an argument or theory, together with the necessary illustrations, quotations or facts. It is a good idea to include with your notes the source of the material (book title, author and page number) so that you can go back to them or add to them later. Notes that are illegible and unattractive to look at are no good — you won't want to come back to them. Use headings, diagrams, tabulations, coloured ink, highlighting, etc. to help the major points stand out.

Learn that you don't know something unless you can write or work it out from memory! In the sciences, check your understanding by first working through your tutorial requirements without using your notes. In the humanities, check that you remember the key points and understand the key arguments or links.

If you own a particular book, you can write notes in the margins — but **do not** deface someone else's book, or a library copy. With large books, you will need to work out a system of accessing your notes — slips of paper maybe, with page references and short indications of what you thought was important.

There are other decisions to be made early on - typing or writing, how much to photocopy, what type of files to use for storing material, whether you want to start a

card index system or develop a database. These are all matters of common sense and personal taste, but if you have difficulties, discuss them with your tutor and/or with students doing the same subject in the year above, and be ready to change or amend the system if it isn't working well. It is helpful if you devise a system early on that will work well for the whole of your time at Oxford. Also remember: **notes are for your use**. Even if something works well for someone else on the same course, if it doesn't work well for you, it won't help you in your course.

Written work

This varies from subject to subject. You should get guidance from your tutor on just what they expect of you (length, level of detail, structure). Some subjects may require a **clear exposition** of a process or subject area; others may be looking for **personal engagement**, based on **sound judgement**. It is always important to read the question carefully, and to ensure that you do not wander too far from a direct answer to it in your essay. For all written work, clear planning should come first. Time spent on making a detailed plan is time well spent, and can help you to clarify for yourself the line of your argument, and the evidence you mean to use to support it, before you begin. **Clear expression** of your argument, using accurate vocabulary and grammar, is also vital. Your argument should be supported by a clear structure — each paragraph should deal with one aspect of the theme, and the paragraphs should be arranged in a logical order, which makes it easier for the reader to follow what you are saying, and be convinced by it.

The tutorial is not only about commenting on your written work — the work itself should give rise to a more general discussion. Your tutor may or may not give grades for each essay or set of worked problems; constructive criticism and advice is more helpful in the end than placing you in a league table. Writing a tutorial essay is a learning exercise rather than an assessment exercise so don't fixate on marks – the actual assessments, whether exams or coursework submissions will usually be quite different in format so any scores you might get for tutorial work would not be a particularly reliable guide to how well you might do in a corresponding exam, say.

Writing an essay is hard work. Don't expect to be satisfied with the result every time. Whilst you should aim to complete each piece of work as well as possible, you should not let yourself be paralysed by a desire to produce the perfect assignment. In particular, make sure that you submit whatever you have by the deadline set by your tutor, even if you plan to work on it further before the tutorial.

Lectures

As well as tutorials, you will have access to lectures, as in any other university; while tutorials are the responsibility of Colleges, the various faculties and departments of the University organize lectures.

In most subjects, lectures form an integral part of the course and may be regarded as complementary to tutorials and classes. In a few – mostly science – subjects and for particular topics, they are intended to be the main form of teaching.

Lectures also have the following advantages:

- The Lecturer is sometimes more up-to-date than the textbooks or even your Tutor, since they have access to a wider range of source material, and the latest ideas, usually because they are doing the research themselves.
- The Lecturer may have a different viewpoint, or a different way of explaining things, from any text or your tutor (and you may learn more by comparing different approaches than by relying on a single source).
- The Lecturer may just be very good at making their subject more interesting, exciting, or relevant.
- The Lecturer may be so well known in your subject area that it is a precious opportunity to hear them 'live'.
- In subjects where the source material is diverse and scattered, the Lecturer will have spent time and energy searching out material, sifting it and bringing it into order. Why replicate all that hard work yourself?
- Examiners may use the lecture courses to decide on the sorts of things they will set questions on, and the depth of knowledge they expect in the answers. That is, they may use the lectures to define the examination syllabus, as well as basing specific questions on material that they know has been covered in detail and is available to all students (unlike material covered in college tutorials).

All this means that you should take lectures seriously and get into the lecture habit early. Apart from anything else, it is a good way of meeting your contemporaries in your subject from other colleges, and of hearing their tutors holding forth. You may later regret having missed the chance of hearing X or Y speak on your subject.

It is a good idea to take notes during lectures, if only to help you concentrate on what is being said. Nevertheless, the first priority is to understand what is going on. Do not try to take hurried, over-detailed notes during the lecture. Listen. Take down major points about the overall thread of the argument. You could then 'write up' your lecture notes at greater length after the lecture.

Even if you feel that you are not getting anything out of the first lecture or two, it is worth persevering. You may have done the work already - but you will probably understand the subject better for having gone over it twice. You may feel that the lectures are not relevant to work you are doing at present - but they may be relevant to work that you will be doing in the next term or next year. You may have difficulty understanding what is going on - but even if you understand only 10% of the ideas, that still gives you a 10% start if you have to tackle the subject later in tutorials or classes. You may find the lecturer boring - but that does not devalue what they have to impart. Give lectures a chance to 'warm up' before you decide to drop them. It is particularly important in the sciences not to drop any lectures lightly.

Practicals

Scientists will also be busy with practical classes. These are crucial in developing investigative skills in experimental disciplines. Practical classes are not just important, they are compulsory. Managing the multiple demands of lectures, practicals and tutorials make time management for scientists particularly complex.

Time management

How do I manage my time?

Having read this far, you may be wondering how on earth you can cope with all the work that is required during a single week to keep up with tutorials, lectures and possibly laboratory practicals.

University is not like school, where every hour is pretty much timetabled for you. As we said at the beginning, the challenge here is to construct a personal, sensible, and workable timetable for you and your own study programme. Few, if any, new students will have worked in this way before, so do not expect to find it easy, or that everything will slot into place straightaway.

Learning how to get the best from the resources available, and to work in ways that are most efficient for you, is a matter of trial and error, at least at first. Take opportunities to talk to other students, especially those at the later stages of the course, about what works best for them, but at the same time, recognize that this may not work best for you.

You will have a number of fixed activities during the week (tutorials, lectures, practicals, classes), and you will need time to study on your own. You must of course also timetable in time for meals, social life, clubs, sports, music, laundry, shopping, etc. It is also very important to make sure you have the time to **get enough sleep**. In fact, planning your own time here effectively may be the most crucial skill that you need to acquire during your time in Oxford. This will also be invaluable to you in your life after this degree. Try to plan your time so that when you do work, you do so efficiently. If you achieve a good level of skill in time management, it will not only make your studies at Oxford easier and more effective, it will be hugely beneficial whatever you do after you finish your degree.

What is important is how well you achieve your objective, not how long you spend doing it. Think about arranging your time to maximise efficiency. Here are some points to bear in mind:

- There are fixed points that you need to organize your work around (lectures, tutorials, classes and (for scientists) practicals), as well as deadlines to meet. Clearly, there is no point in allocating the three days immediately before a

deadline to completing a piece of work if those three days have already been filled with other fixed commitments.

- Do not underestimate how long you need to spend on a piece of work, so allow some flexibility when planning it. Different people need different amounts of time for the same piece of work, so don't just do what everybody else seems to be doing. This can even change week to week, as one essay or problem sheet may take more or less time than the last.
- Try to work evenly throughout the week, to avoid overload when deadlines loom. As a guide, you should aim to work the equivalent of two sessions a day, six days a week (thinking of the day as having three sessions: morning, afternoon and evening, each comprising three to four hours).
- Different people work best at different times of the day or night. A nine-to-five programme, Monday to Friday is unlikely to work for most people, and for the same reason, you should not regard the weekends as 'free time', as you will nearly always have some work to do. It may not be a priority for you but it may be worth noting that 'student nights' at clubs are generally mid-week. If you wish to take advantage of this it is quite possible to get your work done if you plan to do some of your academic work at the weekend and take some of your non-working time in the 'working week'.
- Work at a pace that suits you. Do not try to work when you are too tired – it's better to take a break than to sit for 15 minutes in front of a page, taking in nothing.
- If you are finding some subject or topic very difficult, it may be worth putting it on one side and coming back to it a day or so later.
- A few hours of good work are worth much more than a lot of hours of poor work.

Both on the academic and non-academic side, you are likely to find yourself very pressed for time in Oxford during term. You can remove some of this pressure by making good academic use of the lengthy vacations. In a number of subjects, the vacation is the time for reading large amounts of essential texts; in others, it is the time for extended essays or projects. It is most important not to neglect this work since failure to cover the texts or other preparatory work in vacations can seriously impede your tutorial work in the following term. This is also a very good time for general background reading and for tidying up work left over from the previous term. Your tutor may also set specific vacation work. If you leave this until you come back to Oxford at the beginning of the next term, then you will just create more problems for yourself. It is **crucial** to plan your vacation work before you leave Oxford, in order to make sure that you have available all the information and resources that you need (e.g. borrowing books you need from Oxford libraries, photocopying articles, or arranging the use of a library close to where you will be staying during the vacation).

If you do have problems organizing your time, then ask your tutor for guidance, preferably before the problem becomes too large, and definitely before you fail to meet a deadline because of the problem. It might help to keep a detailed record of how much time each day you actually spend working. It is also possible that you are being given too much work to do. So for instance, if you are a science student with a particularly heavy practical load one week, then ask your tutor to take account of this when arranging tutorial work.

Organization of notes

All this work will generate a lot of paperwork. Take time to get those papers organized so that you can use them. If you are tired at the end of a tutorial, it is tempting just to throw everything into a pile, but once you have done that a couple of times, you have made the whole thing harder.

Get ahead – buy files and folders before you need them so that you always have somewhere to store stuff. And when you put it in files, think about how you need to organize it – keeping topics together, having a lecture series stored sequentially, or the notes for an essay followed by the essay itself. Once you have a system, stick to it; it will not be perfect but at least you will know how to navigate around your work. Try and finish each day with a **clear desk** if you can; it helps when you start the next day's work if you do not have a pile of papers to look through first.

FAQs

1. What will my tutor expect from me, and what can I expect from my tutor?

Please refer to the document of the same name which provides more detail about this.

2. How will I know how well (or badly) I'm doing?

Continual monitoring of a student's progress is a central part of the education process. It is particularly important at Oxford, where many undergraduates have only two sets of public examinations during their programmes of study. At Somerville, your progress will be monitored through mock examinations (collections), end of term reports, and via the academic progress and monitoring and support process. More information about this can be found in the Undergraduate Handbook.

3. How can I get support?

Remember, if your work is going badly, then other worries are likely to crowd in. Nevertheless, sometimes it is the other way round, and personal problems can cause your work to suffer. We all recognize that adjusting to the academic demands of a degree course, on top of the other changes that go along with moving to Somerville, can be challenging, and student life can sometimes be stressful. Consequently, we are keen to provide you with several sources of additional help and support, should you need it. Students can talk to their Personal Tutor, the Student Welfare Lead, the Senior Tutor, or out of office hours, the Student Welfare Advisors. Their contact details can be found in the Undergraduate Handbook or the 'Health and Wellbeing' section of the website.

4. What should I do if I am not happy with my tutorials?

Occasionally, problems may arise about your tutorials which you may feel are not of your making. For instance, you may not get on with your tutorial partner, or perhaps you think that your tutor is not explaining some points adequately, or not making it sufficiently clear how well your work is progressing. Usually the best course of action is to talk frankly to your tutor (by making an appointment to see them outside the tutorial). If you are reluctant for any reason to speak to your tutor, arrange to talk in confidence to

the Senior Tutor, Dr Steve Rayner (senior.tutor@some.ox.ac.uk). There is more detail on feedback processes and how to raise concerns in the Undergraduate Handbook.

And finally . . .

Here are some references to books and web sites that may be of interest

The Good Study Guide, by Andy Northedge (published by the Open University). There are versions for both Arts and Science. *The Study Skills Handbook*, Dr Stella Cottrell (Palgrave Study Guides). There are also small booklets published by Blackwells on *How to Write Essays*, *Taking Notes from Lectures*.

If you would like to read some descriptions of tutorials and accounts of their purpose written by tutors across a wide range of humanities and science subjects, then you might be interested in *The Oxford Tutorial: 'Thanks, you taught me how to think'*, edited by David Palfreyman published by OxCHEPS, 2001. There are copies in the College Library, and the book is available in Blackwells. None of the essays (all by eminent Oxford academics) is long, but all are lively and interesting to dip into.

Oxford University Student Union has some useful resources available through the Academic Affairs section of their Web Site <https://www.oxfordsu.org/> It gives links to other institutions' materials available on the Web, and covers thesis writing for graduate students as well as aspects of study more focused on undergraduate issues.

In addition to the Somerville website at www.some.ox.ac.uk, the University's Student Gateway gives access to lots of practical information <http://www.ox.ac.uk/students>

We wish you a happy, fulfilling, and productive time at Oxford!

**Stephen Rayner
Senior Tutor
June 2026**