

Academic essentials for new students

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From the Senior Tutor, Balliol College

A new knowledge world is about to open before you. It will be exhilarating and empowering. It should also be challenging, sometimes bewildering and even, at times, frustrating. Embrace all of that experience and keep going. By the time you graduate, you will be amazed at how far you've travelled.

There are, of course, some rules. Formal requirements for your degree are found in the [Examination Regulations](#) and for your student status in the [University Student Handbook](#).

In College, you will have a lot of freedom in terms of what and how you learn. The one requirement we make of you is that you remain in 'good academic standing'. What we mean by that is set out in the College Handbook as excerpted below but can be summarised as 'turning up and turning in' – attending all teaching and submitting all work as directed.

We trust you will be feeling excited about the intellectual life that awaits you. You may imagine that you are alone in also feeling uncertain about what work will be expected of you at Oxford, and how to achieve it. You will not be alone: try to take advantage of that fact by talking to other students, in your own and in other subjects; and by practising these five 'A's':

- **accept** that adjustment to university work can take time;
- **actively** listen and respond to feedback from your tutors;
- **ask** questions on any topics you are curious or in doubt about;
- seek **advice** if something is troubling you;
- and **allow** yourself room to experiment, make some mistakes, and find out what approaches to learning in higher education work best for you.

You can start now by looking at these pages:

- **[Oxford Transition Support](#)**
 - [Freshers: adjusting to university life](#)
 - [Study skills and training](#) (from the [Academic guidance](#) section of the University website; resources specific to online learning are on the [Remote Study](#) pages)

And by listening to this [Guide for Freshers](#) podcast.

You may at some point want to draw on one or more of these:

- [Supportive resources](#): help and self-help provided by Oxford University Counselling Service.

On your arrival, you will be directed to a set of **first-year study skills** aimed specifically at Freshers (you'll need your single sign-on credentials to access these).

What the College expects from you

The College expects you to remain in what it calls 'good academic standing' throughout your course. Its criteria for good academic standing at undergraduate level (including 2nd BA) are set out in the [College Handbook](#) (2.3.2):

At undergraduate level (including 2nd BA), students shall be deemed to be of 'good academic standing' only if they:

- Keep appointments with tutors and College Officers, keep informed of electronic and other communications sent by tutors and the University and College academic authorities and those on the noticeboards, and attend Handshaking (end-of-term reports) and Master's Interviews as required.
- Pass (normally by the second attempt in cases where this is permitted by applicable regulations) the First Public Examination or other examinations laid down by the University as a necessary part of their course (2.5.7).
- Attend on time all College tutorials, classes and other required academic engagements, including collections (2.5.1) and intercollegiate classes (2.1.8), and all University classes and practicals, except where permission on adequate grounds is obtained, normally in advance, from the tutor(s) concerned.
- Produce on time work of a standard commensurate with individual ability and circumstances and appropriate to the stage in the course that has been reached: normally of 2:1 standard, but in no case below Third Class standard. Undergraduates are not allowed to read for a Pass degree.
- Undertake that all work submitted is their own and is consistent with good academic practice (2.3.1).

The College trusts that its undergraduates will be so well motivated by their interest in their subjects that detailed instructions about working habits will be unnecessary. It is also difficult to give general guidance as appropriate working habits differ widely from subject to subject. Nevertheless, the following notes may be a helpful indication of how the Oxford system works. **In the first place, you are expected to attend all tutorials (and any classes) without fail. If for very good reason you find that it is impossible to attend at**

the scheduled time, you must contact your tutor in advance and try to arrange a new time. Where your tutorials are in pairs or other small groups, you should involve your tutorial partner(s) in any rearranging. The same considerations apply to larger groups, such as College classes. Such classes may be most important to your work, and with a little goodwill a time can normally be found which will suit everybody. There is an extra reason for being punctilious in the case of tutorials arranged with tutors from other colleges: failure in this respect lets the College down and may make it more difficult for us to engage the best outside tutors. If tutorials or classes are missed without good reason you may be charged for them.

In the second place, you are expected to prepare adequately for tutorials (and classes). For many students, particularly in the Humanities, this will mean writing essays. On average an undergraduate can expect to write one essay a week, three in every two weeks, or two a week depending on the topic. Your tutor will give you a list of the reading required. If it is your partner's turn to write the essay, you should not neglect the reading. You should make notes for the essay you would have written if it had been your turn. It is all too easy to find, when you come to revise for the examination, that your knowledge of the topics that you didn't actually write about is only sketchy. For other students, especially in the Sciences, preparation for tutorials will involve attempting a set of problems, perhaps based on problem sheets obtainable from the department. You are normally expected to attempt every problem, and either hand in written solutions in advance or bring them along to the tutorial. You may well not be able to do all the problems: if you cannot produce a solution, you should read as much as you can about the relevant theory and be prepared to discuss the problem in the tutorial. Even if you do produce a solution, do not be afraid to ask your tutor in the tutorial to go through particular points you found difficult. Whatever your subject, remember that tutorials are for your benefit – use them wisely! Make a note of anything you can't understand in the weekly lectures or reading and ask your tutor to explain. Try to develop a pro-active approach to your education early on: it will serve you well.

Scientists are also expected to do an adequate amount of practical work. On average you should expect to be at the laboratory about five hours per week (more in some subjects). Be careful to keep up to date in this: it is bad to be struggling to meet practical deadlines at a time when you should be revising for an exam.

All public lectures in Oxford are open to you. Your tutors will advise you what lectures to attend in your subject. You should make time afterwards to work on the notes you have made on a course of lectures, to review them and perhaps redraft them into a more coherent form. You may find the vacation a good time for this.

All in all, this comes to a substantial amount of work. It is difficult to say precisely how much: people vary in their working practices and their efficiency. But if you find you are spending significantly less than **40 hours per week** on academic work of one kind or another, you should ask yourself whether you are doing enough work to deserve an Oxford education, or to get full benefit from it. On the other hand, if you find it necessary to do much more than this, simply in order to keep up, you should perhaps discuss with your tutor the more efficient arrangement of your work.

Terms at Oxford are very short and concentrated. It is vital to do some serious academic work during vacation. This is not to say that we do not expect you to take a holiday, and we recognise that you may need to undertake paid employment; but it does mean for some weeks of each vacation you should arrange to devote most of the working week to study. In some subjects this will take the form mainly of reviewing the work done in the previous term, clearing up remaining problems, and preparing for collections (written tests held in College) you will sit at the beginning of the following term; in other subjects vacation work means covering the preliminary reading for a subject in the following term's tutorials. Collections are marked and returned early in the term in which they are sat (we have a deadline of Monday of 2nd Week for marks to be submitted, but it may take a little longer for a tutor to get the script back to you): if you have not had your collection returned by 4th Week of term, please contact the College Office and we will chase it up.

What you can expect from your tutors and the College

If for any reason you are finding it difficult to work effectively, tell someone about the problem as soon as you can. If you prefer not to approach your tutor, try your Personal Tutor, the Senior Tutor, the Chaplain/Wellbeing & Welfare Officer, or the Master. **Don't let problems go unaddressed.** The College wants to help you to have an enjoyable and fulfilling education. It cannot do its job in this respect if it is not properly informed about any difficulties you may be experiencing. You will find that the College is flexible and responsive where students are facing problems. **We can quickly put in place academic and welfare support that is tailored to your needs and circumstances.**

Tutors expect their students to develop an adult attitude of self-discipline towards their work. You can therefore expect less spoon-feeding than perhaps is normal at school. In particular, although you can expect a discussion week by week of the academic content of your work and important omissions, you may well not receive an explicit weekly report about whether it is 'adequate'. Do not be discouraged by this: if things are going wrong you can expect to be told explicitly while there is still time to put them right. Moreover, you should not confuse academic argument with negative criticism: a tutor who expresses opposition to the points in your essay may be paying you the compliment of allowing you to take part in a debate.

Your tutors will give you regular guidance and feedback on your work. Tutorials are themselves forms of feedback. You will also receive more structured forms of guidance. For example, when you start each new paper your tutors will advise you on the relevant reading and the way to approach the particular topic. As your course proceeds this form of guidance will decrease, and you will be expected to make more of these judgments on your own. At the end of most terms you will meet your tutors as a group, sometimes with the Master, for formal feedback on your work: this is called 'Handshaking'. There is, however, no Handshaking in any term in which you are taking a University examination. You will also sometimes have separate meetings – 'Interviews' – with the Master alone. (Handshaking and Interview schedules are posted in the Lodge.) If at any stage you feel you have particular problems about your work, or if you want more feedback or guidance than occurs in the normal course of events, do not be afraid to ask for advice. A tutor will always be willing to discuss matters in more detail if invited to do so by a student. In any case, you should expect to have a private meeting with a tutor at least once a term to discuss your general progress: if this is not arranged for you, ask for it.

How the College deals with unsatisfactory work

You will be supported to study effectively. Should academic discipline be imposed, you will have an opportunity to demonstrate you can do satisfactory work and to return to good academic standing. The formal position with regard to unsatisfactory work is spelled out as follows in the College Handbook 2.8.1:

Under its Academic Disciplinary Procedure (ADP), the College **may at any time require** you to discontinue residence, either temporarily or permanently, for failure in public or (for undergraduates) College examinations, unsatisfactory work, or other failures to be in good academic standing (2.3.2), **provided that** you have first been given clear and adequate notice, in writing, of the conditions you must fulfil to remain a member of the College, and that you have then failed to meet them. (Here and elsewhere, the forms of written communication used by the College should be understood to include electronic as well as printed or hand-written messages, notices and letters.)

The College body that decides how to apply this rule is Academic Progress Committee (APC), the membership of which consists of the Master (in the Chair), the Vice-Master (Academic), the Senior Tutor, the Chaplain/Wellbeing & Welfare Officer, and four Tutorial Fellows, two in Humanities/Social Science and two in Science, which meets at least three times a term. If your work is giving cause for concern, your tutors may refer your case to the APC. You can normally expect to be informed by them in advance that this is going to happen. At an early stage of referral, the APC discussion may well result in the Senior Tutor sending you a formal warning of the need for improvement. You may also be placed on

'academic probation'. Such probation will ask no more of you than is asked of all students, but will involve a closer monitoring that these normal expectations are being met, and an open and constructive meeting with the Senior Tutor to discuss matters. The assumption is that the College will work with you to turn things round, but you will also be told what could happen if you do not improve. Formal academic discipline involves the possibility of 'special collections', college examinations with specific marks you are required to attain, or a final formal warning and a set period of 'academic disciplinary probation'. If you do not reach the required standard in a second and final special collection or you fail to return to good academic standing while on disciplinary probation you will usually have to leave the College. That is very much a last resort however. You will always have been given time to display an improvement: at a normal minimum, the time between one APC meeting and the next. Although the Senior Tutor's letter may mention particular points about which the APC is dissatisfied, the judgment is always made in the general context of your standard of work as a whole. Besides the ultimate sanction of being sent away from the College permanently, there are lesser penalties which the APC may deploy if appropriate. There is an opportunity to put your side of the case to APC and an appeals process against its decision to require you to leave.

Apart from general unsatisfactory work, there are other matters which may cause the APC to give you formal warning or to impose sanctions. These include failure to attend collections (normal termly college exams) and failure to do prescribed vacation work. Sometimes students are mentioned at APC in order to discuss a problem, or to give notice of concern, without any proposal to impose sanctions. It is hoped that students will be given explicit notice in advance when their names are to be raised in this way, but this is not always possible.

All subjects have a First Public Examination (either Prelims or Moderations). If you fail this examination at the normal time, you will usually be allowed one further attempt, at the earliest possible next opportunity. Unless there are special circumstances, a second failure will automatically mean that you have to leave. Note also, however, that if your subject has a classified First Public Examination, failure to obtain honours will be taken as *prima facie* evidence that you are not capable of work of honours standard, and some indication that you are able to reach this level will be required before you are permitted to remain to work for Finals.

How the College rewards excellent work

The Senior Tutor will write to you whenever you do very well in collections (college exams). If you gain a Distinction in the First Public Examination, you can hope to be elected an Exhibitioner and, with continuing excellence, a Scholar of the College. The earliest time at which this might happen is the beginning of your second year. If you gain First Class mark(s)

short of an overall Distinction in the First Public Examination, you may receive a Prelims Prize. And if your college work is consistently very good, especially in collections, an Exhibition and Scholarship will normally follow. All these awards attract a small amount of extra money, usually from funds established by or in memory of old members of the College; and the College holds an annual lunch ceremony for its Scholars. Scholarships and Exhibitions are held for one year at a time, but holders may be re-elected if their work continues at a suitable standard.

There are also various College prizes. Some of these are awarded for excellence in ordinary work, or distinguished performance in University examinations. Others are awarded as a result of essay or other competitions on announced topics. Applications for academic project grants are invited annually and the awards made cover a great variety of student interests. Provision can usually be made for vacation study grants to those needing to stay up, especially when preparing for examinations.

We seize every opportunity publicly to recognise the achievements and academic excellence of our students, and take great pride and pleasure in doing so.

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