Student Perspectives

Arts subjects

Detailed accounts of what it is really like to study Arts subjects at King’s College, Cambridge, written by students.

What is it really like to study at Cambridge University? We asked King's undergraduates studying a range of essay subjects to discuss their course and options, the teaching and workload, life in the College, what they do outside their studies, and how they found the application process.

These accounts give detailed and individual experiences of specific courses, but they are worth reading if you're interested in other courses too: they give a range of views about general aspects of being part of the college community and how things work both socially and academically.

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For more Student Perspectives and further information about studying at King’s, please see our website: http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/index.html
King’s Student Perspectives

Economics

Viv, 1st year

How did you come to study Economics?

From a young age I had my heart set on pursuing a Law degree. I had always relished the idea of dissecting arguments, and assimilating and processing large amounts of information. As both an academic subject and a potential career path, Law seemed to offer a great deal. As I didn’t study Economics until my AS levels (age 16), I never really entertained the idea of an Economics degree until a very late stage.

In my AS year, I studied English Literature, Mathematics, History and Economics. The next year, I dropped English Literature and picked up AS Further Mathematics. My advice to anyone thinking of studying Economics is to do as much Maths as possible. I regret not taking full double Maths, because it may have made the mathematical content of the Cambridge course easier to handle. That said, if you don’t do double Maths, this is certainly not a barrier to doing the Economics degree: there is so much support from supervisors that any concerns are easily addressed.

Although I was divided between Law and Economics, I eventually chose Economics and have never looked back. Economics suits me because of my interest in mathematics, which marries much better with Economics than with Law. Fundamentally, it was the continuation of both mathematical and analytical methods that drew me into Economics. Economics seemed to offer a breadth that was unparalleled by any other subject.

What got your interested in the subject matter?

In terms of the course content, the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis to tackle a wide range of issues makes Economics stand out as relevant and exciting. After reading Naomi Klein’s “Shock Doctrine”, I was interested in the idea that a crisis can help to introduce radical economic policy in society. This idea resonated strongly with me, particularly in the context of the significant shock that the recession had dealt to the global economy. I was aware of criticism about the shortcomings of Economics given the level of global economic volatility (see for example John Lanchester’s lecture “Economics-0 Reality-1”), however, ironically, as I thought about the issue, I became increasingly assured about the significance and relevance of Economics both as an academic subject and in its practical applications.
Although the reverberations from recent events have irrevocably changed the nature of Economics, it is the prospect of being part of this evolution that makes studying the subject so exciting and important. Whilst there have certainly been dramatic changes to the subject, at its core Economics remains a subject which focuses on human nature and on the fundamental issue that has and will continue to beset the world: that of allocating scarce resources amongst infinite needs. Never has Economics been more prevalent in our day-to-day lives. This continued relevance in our ever-changing world makes the study of Economics a vital part of our society.

Why Cambridge?

After deciding on Economics, I began sifting though university prospectus after university prospectus, looking at the courses available. Initially, Cambridge, and in particular King’s, stood out because of the number of prestigious economists affiliated with the institution, ranging from Keynes to Pigou and Kahn. My desire to apply to Cambridge was heightened by the structure of the course, which I thought suited me well. Again, it was the breadth offered that was so appealing. Having a limited knowledge of Economics, I liked the fact that students are not asked to specialise and select papers in the first year, instead taking five compulsory papers covering micro, macro, quantitative methods, political and sociological aspects of Economics, and Economic History. Building from this foundation in the second and third years, students are then given the opportunity to specialise further.

Having just finished my first year at King’s, I truly believe that the Cambridge course structure has made me a much more rounded economist than I would otherwise have been, and it has opened my eyes to aspects of Economics that initially I would have dismissed. For example, although I had studied History at A-Level, the Economic History paper was different from anything I had ever encountered in both content and focus. I had never really studied British history as my A-Level course focused on global history, so I studied the Cold War rather than the Industrial Revolution etc. The really concentrated analysis and in-depth examination of events we learn to do at Cambridge felt like a huge step up from the A-Level course, and meant that supervisions would often consist of lively debates. Economic History was undoubtedly one of the more challenging papers for me, but also definitely the area in which I made the most progress. For me, this is clear evidence of the benefits of the breadth of the Cambridge course. I don’t think I would have picked the Economic History paper if I had the choice, but looking back I’ve gained a number of really valuable skills and I really enjoyed it.

I also like the way students are taught at Cambridge. In Year 12, I was lucky enough to participate in the CUSU shadowing scheme, and so spent a few days in Cambridge “shadowing” an Economics student. Amongst other things, this experience enabled me to participate in a few supervisions, which really increased my desire to apply to Cambridge. The supervision system is unique to Oxbridge. Supervisions are small one-hour sessions with experts in the field. Their size will differ between subject and college,
but for Economics at King’s they range from being one-to-one to a maximum of four students per supervisor.

*Note from the Admissions Office: King’s continues to welcome talented Year 12 students from schools without a tradition of top university entry to stay in College and ‘shadow’ a current student studying their subject. For information about the Shadowing Scheme, please see: http://www.applytocambridge.com/shadowing/

**What preparation work do you have to do for supervisions?**

For each supervision we are given work to do, usually a problem set or an essay to work on. This work is to be handed in before the supervision. During supervisions we then discuss what has been set. For micro and maths we usually get problem sets to work through, whereas for macro, politics and history we get set reading lists and essay questions. The time it takes to complete supervision work differs between papers but I’d say that each supervision takes anywhere between four and twelve hours of preparatory work beforehand.

Personally, I find that essays take me much longer than problem sets due to the amount of reading required. At first, the reading lists seemed endless but the key is that not all of the material is necessary to produce a good essay. Even though there may be ten books and fifteen articles listed on a reading list, you are certainly not expected to read each item from cover to cover: the skill comes in being selective, and over time you learn how to speed-read and extract relevant content quickly.

I remember the first essay I handed in. It was returned to me covered in red ink and I was slightly disheartened. However, re-reading that first essay later on, I was shocked that I ever turned in an essay of that standard! It is really amazing how quickly you develop skills and how much you learn in a short space of time. The length of essays varies between supervisors. My macro supervisor last year asked for essays of between six and eight pages in length, which seems like a lot at first, but because you’re covering economic theories in a great deal of detail, you never struggle to hit the limit. In contrast, my Economic History supervisor requested that essays were to be written in exam conditions, even from my first essay. This meant that although the reading is time-consuming, you only have forty-five minutes to plan and write the essay, which is painful at first but really pays off when it comes down to the exam.

The problem sets we get consist of a number of problems and short essay questions; around six or so in each. Each one usually takes me a couple of hours. We don’t really get reading lists for problem sets, since most of the material for problem sets is covered in lectures. There are recommended textbooks which can be useful, however the lecture notes are normally helpful. The Economics department is really helpful because all lecture notes are put up on the internet so if you miss a lecture or lose your notes, you can always access a copy.
What do you do in the supervisions?

Mostly supervisions consist of going through our work, however they often involve debates or defending our opinions. At first, I found it hard to explain my arguments clearly, however the supervisors make you feel at ease so that after a while it becomes second nature. Not only does the supervision system help you to develop your academic ability and to formulate arguments coherently and under pressure, it also gives you other advantages: I have found that my interview skills have greatly improved as a result.

As a sixth former, the prospect of having a lot of very focused contact hours from leaders in the field seemed like a great opportunity. When I arrived here, I found that although at first I found them daunting because it takes a little time to get used to them, I can really see that the supervision system is clearly one of the greatest academic benefits of studying at Cambridge. Supervisors are always willing to stop and answer any questions that may arise and don’t mind if you ask them to slow down or repeat anything. They always try their hardest to create a really relaxed atmosphere where you feel comfortable saying and asking anything.

What are lectures like?

Lectures take place on the Sidgwick site, which is ideal as it is only a few minutes’ walk from King’s. Students from the whole university (around 180) attend lectures, so they are a good opportunity to meet fellow economists from other colleges. They are delivered by leaders in the field and you will even be supervised by some of your lecturers, which is really helpful because it means that your supervisions will always closely correspond to the lecture content.

Unlike school or college where lessons are compulsory, lectures are not compulsory. Although it can be tempting to miss lectures, I find them really helpful because they give a good overview of the content to cover. The lecturers are also very good at highlighting the most important things to take away and review. Because there is so much content to cover, I think lectures do have an important role in sifting out and stressing the key issues in a topic.

Developing shorthand techniques is definitely a good idea for both lectures and supervisions but you’ll also gain the skill of knowing what’s important to ensure that your notes are effective for you. The pace of lectures varies, and it is inevitable that you’ll find them either too fast or too slow at times. The same can be said for supervisions but to a lesser extent. Because you’re in such small groups, supervisions can be tailored to suit you.
Where do you like to work?

I tend to work mostly in King’s Library. I lived in the Keynes building during my first year so it was a really convenient place to work. Not only is the library a really lovely space to work in, but you also have most of the resources you need. If there are any books that aren’t already there, you can ask the library to buy a copy, which is always done very quickly. Sometimes, usually if I have a gap between lectures, I work in the Marshall Economics library on the Sidgwick site or in the law faculty, but King’s Library is definitely my favourite place to work.

How did you find the transition from school?

Compared to A-levels, there is definitely a lot more work at Cambridge, and there is a much greater emphasis on working independently. First year economists typically have around fourteen hours of lectures a week plus two or three one-hour supervisions a week.

During my A-levels, I found that most of the content was taught in lessons, so the purpose of assignments was to consolidate and further the taught content. The main difference at Cambridge is that you are expected to teach yourself. At Cambridge, lectures only cover some of the course content. Unlike A-Levels, we are expected to learn the material from lectures and our own reading, then supervisions act to reinforce what we have learned. It is a shock to the system and I definitely found the quantity of work hard at first. Once you get into a rhythm, everything seems to fall into place though.

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Term time is intense, especially because Cambridge has 8-week rather than 10-week terms, but there’s always help when you need it, be it from your Director of Studies, supervisors or fellow students.

What is it like to be a King’s Economics student?

The great thing about King’s is that we have a fairly large Economics department. There are seven other economists in my year so if I ever miss something I know I can turn to one of them to help me out. The college system is really great in this respect; you’ll make great friends who are always ready to help you if you need it. Sometimes, especially when we’re revising, we’ll work on things together. Its nice to be able to talk your ideas over and it makes revision and supervision work a lot easier.

The relaxed atmosphere in King’s means that you always feel able to ask for help - I’m always knocking on my friends’ doors when I get stuck with a supervision essay.

The second years at King’s were really helpful, recommending books or websites when I was struggling, or helping me with supervision work.

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Socially, the Marshall society, which is the Cambridge Economics society, holds events where you can meet fellow economists across the University, and sometimes our Director of Studies holds drinks parties, where all King’s economists get together.

Another piece of advice for anyone starting is to make friends with those in the year above. The second years at King’s were really helpful, recommending books or websites when I was struggling, or helping me with supervision work.

Is there time to do other things?

Given the breadth of the course, it’s not surprising that the workload is highly demanding. Balancing academic work with a social life can be challenging at times. However, the great thing about King’s is that the College actively encourages you to pursue extra-curricular activities.

I play in the ladies’ netball team and will be the captain next year. We play once a week at the weekend, usually on a Sunday morning. There are matches against other college teams in the university league. Last year we did well and actually managed to move up a league. Sport is a really great way to meet other people and we always have a team brunch after matches, which is a lot of fun.

I am also the treasurer for our student-run cellar bar, the King’s Bunker. These opportunities not only give you a great way to make friends and get involved in College life, but also allow you to greatly enhance your CV.

I recently did spring weeks at Credit Suisse and Morgan Stanley, and found that these extracurricular pursuits were a great talking point in interviews, allowing me to demonstrate many of the skills that employers look for.

Whilst the large majority of my week at Cambridge is taken up with lectures, supervisions and preparation work, there is also a lot of time to enjoy yourself. The cliché of ‘work hard play hard’ definitely applies here.

How did you get on with the application process?

Although the application process was much lengthier for Cambridge in comparison with the other four UK universities I applied to, it was clear that this was due to a real desire to understand each of us as unique candidates. My sixth form college were keen to submit what was then called a Special Access form (now it’s called the Extenuating Circumstances form), which I initially resisted: I didn’t want to be treated any differently from the other candidates. However, after speaking to a number of people at the open days, I was assured that this would not be the case.

The interview felt much more like an informal chat than the ‘typical’ interview I had pictured in my head. Before the interview I was given some time to read an article. I was then asked a few questions on it and had to discuss my own thoughts. When I was completely stumped on one question, I suddenly began to panic, but my interviewers were really helpful and guided me through. Whilst the interview was certainly
challenging, it bore no resemblance to the horror stories I had been fed. In fact, it was much more enjoyable than I expected. One of my interviewers is now my Director of Studies.

**What are you looking forward to next year?**

My first year has gone so quickly that I can hardly believe that I’m already going into the second year! I can’t wait to get back to see everyone but I’m also looking forward to the academic challenges second year will bring. I’ve chosen to do the maths paper next year (evidence that not doing double maths is really not a problem!) so I’m looking forward to that too.

I’m also really excited by what the new term will bring for the King’s Bunker. The committee have all been working hard to put on some great events in Freshers’ week and Michaelmas term, which should be great.
I’ve just finished my first year of the English Tripos at King’s, and it’s been fantastic so far. I had always wanted to study at Cambridge, so it seemed quite unreal when I got my offer. I was worried that after all the time and effort I’d spent getting here, it would turn out that I wasn’t actually suited to Cambridge. Thankfully, those worries soon went away: I love my course and my college, and I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

What attracted you to English at King’s?

I was attracted to the College partly for its literary reputation, and studying English here is definitely added to by the knowledge that so many authors I admire have done the same thing. When I visited King’s, I felt like I could belong here. I can’t explain why, but I felt more at home here than at any of the other Cambridge colleges I had visited, however lovely they were. You get the best of both worlds at King’s: we’ve got the history and architecture without a sense of elitism or exclusivity. The college system means that you’ll inevitably get to know people doing a variety of different subjects, which I think is quite important. The authors you’re studying will have been influenced by all sorts of different things, and your understanding and writing will be better if you are too.

Cambridge is a wonderful place to lounge around reading a book, and in King’s there are many particularly lovely places to lounge: in the coffee shop, bar or library when it’s cold, and out on the Backs by the river when it’s sunny.

Starting the course

At first, it may not seem that you will have time to do anything quite so leisurely as lounging with a book: the learning curve is steep, and your first few weeks will be frightening. Don’t worry though – soon enough you’ll notice that your essays are somehow getting done. Everyone takes time to get used to the workload, and everyone stresses and panics. Despite this, when talking to my fellow English students at the end of the year, we all agreed that being thrown in at the deep end was worth it. The way you think changes so rapidly, and you find yourself able to make connections and read texts in a completely new way.

This year is the first time I’ve felt fully engaged in my education: I’m not having to jump through a restrictive set of hoops, and I’m surrounded by people who are just as interested in my subject as I am.
Supervisions

Supervisions and classes will form the basis of your teaching. Supervisions, as you may already know, are one on one or two on one teaching sessions. You will write an essay for your supervisor and talk about it in the supervision (in theory – sometimes the best supervisions are the ones where you go off on a tangent and talk about something completely different). I was terrified before my first supervision, and was more than pleasantly surprised when it turned out to be the most intellectually thrilling experience of my life.

It’s fine not to do an essay occasionally. This is one of the many advantages of the supervision system: you’re doing work for people you know and can talk to if it’s getting too much. Twice this year I haven’t managed to do an essay on time, and in both cases my supervisors were fine with it. You’ll either get an extension on your deadline, or you’ll just have a discussion in the supervision about the texts and what you could have written about. In fact, when I took the latter option for an essay on The Winter’s Tale which I couldn’t do, I had one of my most interesting supervisions of the year.

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And classes?

Aside from supervisions, you will have classes each week with the other people doing English at King’s in your year – usually about eight students in total. These tend to be about the texts you’re going to write about for your essay, or something else that complements that. These are also great, and it’s really interesting to see how your interaction as a group changes over the year. Depending on the papers you’re doing, you may also have faculty classes with people from other colleges.

Lectures are particularly useful for getting an overview of the period you’re studying outside of what you’re writing about for supervisions.

Don’t you have lectures too?

The situation with lectures is also a bit odd: there are none you have to go to, which is unique in Cambridge as far as I’m aware. I’ve found it worth going to quite a lot of lectures, partly because my brain doesn’t work properly in the mornings, and the only way I can be productive is to soak up someone else’s knowledge!

Lectures are particularly useful for getting an overview of the period you’re studying outside of what you’re writing about for supervisions. Sometimes it can be difficult to see how everything fits together when you’re changing your focus every week; lectures can fill in the gaps. For example, in a series of lectures on Shakespeare’s tragedies I learnt about the companies of boy actors around at the time, which helped to explain some particularly impenetrable Shakespearean jokes I had come across. As you’re not restricted to just going to lectures on the papers you’re doing, you can also find out all sorts of weird and wonderful things which might be useful in the future.

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You’ll get to know pretty quickly which lectures are worth going to and which lecturers you particularly like (or dislike), and lectures can also help you to develop particular interests. Some of my friends are doing coursework next year on writers that they found out about from lectures, not supervisions.

**About the course: choices**

English is different to most other courses at Cambridge in two important ways: you don’t have any exams in your first year (everyone will be jealous of you), and you don’t get much choice in what papers you take in your first two years. You only really get one choice, which is whether you take Paper 7, studying the literature of another European language, or Paper 8 which looks at the basis of the English language. I’d say do Paper 7 if you can – if you don’t know a foreign language already, you can learn Italian from scratch, which isn’t as impossible as it sounds. I’ve been studying German literature and it’s been one of the most enjoyable parts of the whole English course; everyone I know who’s taken Paper 7 has really liked it. Aside from this, you’ll take four papers which each cover a different period of English literature across your first two years, and a paper on Shakespeare in the last term of your first year.

Although you don’t get to choose the papers initially, you will have a lot of choice as to exactly what you’ll read for weekly supervisions – for example, I have successfully managed to avoid reading Dickens, to my great relief. If there’s really nothing that inspires you on a reading list, but you know there’s something else from the period that might, it’s always worth talking to your supervisor – supervisors want you to write about something that interests you, not force you to write about something you hate.

**Practical issues**

King’s is about five minutes’ walk away from the English Faculty, which is on the Sidgwick Site. Lectures are either held in the Faculty or the Lecture Block, which is also part of the Sidgwick Site. I generally get all of my books from the English library, although the King’s Library usually has everything you might need as well. If all else fails, there’s always the University Library, which is also very close to King’s, just opposite the Sidgwick Site. I’ve also found the English library to be a good place to work – apart from the peace and quiet, it’s just far away enough from College to stop me being distracted by going to get coffee or meet people in the bar.

I haven’t committed myself to anything seriously this year, but I’ve dabbled in stand up with the Footlights, journalism, and production for a student TV channel.

**And when you’re not working?**

English students have a well-deserved reputation for shaping Cambridge’s cultural scene. As you might expect, a lot of people doing English write for student newspapers and get involved in theatre. The student protest movement in Cambridge is also pretty much run by English students. I did think before I came to Cambridge that the various societies and clubs might be somewhat cliquey, but it’s actually very easy to get involved in anything you’re interested in.
I haven’t committed myself to anything seriously this year, but I’ve dabbled in stand up with the Footlights, journalism, and production for a student TV channel. I think you need to choose what you do with your free time carefully, as some people do burn themselves out trying to cope with essays and hundreds of extra-curricular activities, but as there’s so much on offer it’s definitely worth having a go at anything you think might be fun.

**What happens when you apply?**

The application process varies from college to college, so it’s worth checking what exactly will be expected of you. Unlike other colleges, at King’s you have a group discussion as well as the more usual individual interview and written test. When you get notice of your interview, you’ll be sent some material to read and think about, and on the day of your interview you will discuss it with other candidates. It was a relief to have something definite I could prepare for, and it was nice to see that the other candidates weren’t super-humans doing fifteen A-Levels, just other nervous 17-year-olds like me! The written test and the interview itself were also fine. Your interviewers will talk to you about things you’ve read, and the questions they ask will be difficult. Take your time, think about what you’re being asked and you might surprise yourself with what you end up saying. Most importantly, if you really feel you can’t answer something, it doesn’t mean you’ve failed. Tell your interviewer you don’t know what to say, and they’ll change the subject or alter the question. And afterwards, try not to worry too much about it. It’s difficult to judge how well you did, so don’t convince yourself one way or the other.

**Any preparation tips?**

The best general piece of advice I was given was to read some pre-1850 texts, as interviewers see a lot of people who have fantastic knowledge of 19th and 20th-century literature, but very little about other periods. Try to read as much as possible, and if something in particular interests you, develop that interest.

In the year leading up to my interview, I read a lot of writers from the 1920s and 30s, including some more unusual ones, and having a particular group of authors that I felt I knew quite well was very helpful.
What attracted you to the course?

One great thing about studying Japanese is that everyone on the course is there because they’re really passionate about the subject. Personally, a mixture of family interest in the country and encounters with Japanese culture when growing up fostered a strong desire to learn more about the country. The reasons for studying Japanese are as varied as there are people on the course – Japanese art, Buddhism, Sino-Japanese relations, even manga and anime have sparked people’s interest and spurred them on to degree-level study.

About the course

In first year, you don’t have a lot of choice in what you study. This is because Japanese is taught as an ab initio language, and there is intensive language study throughout the year. As someone who arrived here thinking of the language as simply a means to the end of learning about Japanese culture, this was both a difficult and an eye-opening experience. The workload is extremely high, but learning so much language in first year means that in second year more time can be given over to optional papers.

In second year you choose two papers to study on top of language, translation and history. Personally I decided on East Asian cinema and Japanese and Korean politics (J10). Other options may include classical Japanese, Japanese society, modern Japanese literature, linguistics, and some Chinese papers such as dynastic history. In fourth year students also choose two papers, the options varying depending on student interest and lecturer availability. However, such topics as classical Japanese, international relations, Japanese history, Korean language and Japanese society tend to be available.

Of course, in third year you don’t study any papers in Cambridge, as you are abroad! You can decide for yourself what to do so long as you inform the faculty of your plans early, but the faculty facilitates study at a Kyoto university for students who don’t have other plans. The vast majority of students choose this option, and almost always come back raving about the experience to the first and second years.

Which parts of the course have you found most interesting and why?

For me the biggest surprise has been my discovery of Korea! In my first year a compulsory module of East Asian history was introduced (EAS1), focussing on Japan, China and Korea. Not only was this an excellent way of reminding me that any society needs to be set in a wider context, but it created an interest in the fascinating history of Korea. In fourth year there is often the option of studying Korean language alongside Japanese, which I am strongly considering.

Other than this, I particularly enjoyed studying the East Asian module (Cinema East) in my second year, and attending various evening seminars. I strongly recommend these, as the quality of the speakers is...
generally extremely high; the talk which I found most interesting was delivered by Japan’s Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Akiko Yamanaka.

Supervisions

Supervisions are hour-long sessions on a pre-decided topic, based usually on a piece of work you have already handed in such as an essay or Japanese-language composition (though these are not expected of you in first year, don’t worry!). You will either be talking only with the lecturer, or as part of a small group of students with the lecturer. They are extremely useful, enabling you to explore topics in a lot more depth than usual and also to get specific feedback on your work. They might be a bit nerve-wracking at first, but you very quickly realise that the lecturers aren’t out to get you – they just want to help you improve!

What is the workload like?

It would be wrong of me to pretend that Japanese isn’t an intense course – the workload is very high, and you aren’t eased into it slowly! However, if you are hard-working and learn to manage your time well, it will be manageable, and the amount of language you learn over the first year is really incredible – you cover four language and grammar lessons and their corresponding exercises per week in first year. You may not have as much free time as in some other subject areas, but it’s absolutely necessary to have some time to relax, see friends, and take part in activities you enjoy!

There is a lot of contact time, and as the department is small, lecturers will be aware if you don’t come to classes very often. While you have no obligation to attend all the lectures (supervisions, though, are compulsory), I would strongly advise attending as many as possible – the standard of teaching is generally very high, and it makes all the difference to how you do on the course.

What is your timetable like?

First year

Michaelmas and Lent terms: four grammar lessons per week (from the green book); four language lessons per week (from the red book. Based on the corresponding grammar lessons); two EAS1 (East Asian history) lessons. As far as supervisions go, I think we had maybe one or two for language, one or two for grammar and one for history each term. There are optional weekly evening seminars as well.

Easter term: six translation lessons per week; two EAS1 lessons per week; three oral language lessons per week. Weekly evening seminars. Fewer supervisions, only for the first part of term. The latter part is freed up for exam preparation.

Second year

Michaelmas and Lent terms: schedules are similar again. One (two-hour) grammar lesson per week; one language lesson per week; two hours of Japanese History per week; two hours each of your two optional modules per week (so four hours in total). Maybe one language supervision, one grammar supervision,
one history supervision, and one supervision each for your optional modules per term. Weekly evening seminars.

Easter term: one two-hour grammar lesson; one language lesson; two oral language lessons; two translation lessons; two lessons each of your two optional modules; two history lessons. Again, this tails off to allow revision time in the second half of term. Maybe one supervision each for grammar, language, optional modules, and history. Weekly evening seminar.

Practical issues

The faculty is small and as such has a good sense of community, which makes it quite a nice place to work.

The department is part of FAMES (the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies) on the Sidgwick Site. This is just past the river, in the corner of the site by the Classics, MML (Modern and Medieval Languages) and Criminology buildings. The faculty is small and as such has a good sense of community, which makes it quite a nice place to work. The library is excellently stocked, and any books which aren’t there will be in the UL (University Library). King’s library is also a great place to work, but unfortunately the selection of books for Japanese students is very small!

What is the applications process like?

Unlike some subjects, there are no tests to sit for Japanese. You simply apply as usual, then have two interviews. One of these is subject-specific, but don’t worry, you needn’t know any Japanese for it! The other is your general interview, which involves broader discussion and is more about how you respond to difficult questions and engage with different topics.

How did you prepare for the degree?

Personally, I was too busy with preparations for leaving home and so on to do much other than read a couple of the suggested books! It is a good idea to read one of the broad historical overviews. Also, have a look through the textbooks to familiarise yourself with the format – don’t be intimidated by it, it’s not as bad as it looks once you get used to it! Don’t worry about getting through everything on the reading list – apart from anything it’s all available in university libraries.

The most important thing to do in preparation is a long-term effort: develop a good work ethic and time management skills. My first year would have been a lot easier had I tried to develop this in sixth form!

Two amazingly useful websites I’d recommend in addition to the faculty suggested reading:

⇒ http://www.jisho.org/ - this is an online Japanese-English dictionary where you can look up words, kanji and example sentences.

⇒ http://nihonshock.com/2010/02/japanese-cheat-sheet-2/ - this is a printable sheet, which sums up a lot of the core grammar for first year in only two sides of A4!

Does it matter where you’re from?

In terms of the subject, it doesn’t matter in the slightest. In my year there are people from state schools, private schools, abroad, who did IB, who did A-levels, who took a gap year... So long as you’re passionate about the subject and prepared to work hard, you’ll be welcome. In terms of the college, once again it
makes no difference to anyone else where you’re from – the important thing is what you do once you arrive!

King’s is well-known for being a friendly environment for people of any background, having a very high state school intake and large number of international students. All this combines to create the friendly, open atmosphere you’ve probably already noticed!

What’s the social life like?

In terms of the subject, you do have to be prepared to spend a lot of time on work – but this in no way means you have to give up your social life! The faculty itself organises some events, and there’s also a university Japanese Society, which holds events and language classes all year. King’s holds some FAMES parties itself, which provide a chance to relax and talk with King’s staff and students from across Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and other FAMES subjects.

Personally I found in first year it was a bit of a struggle to keep the balance between my work and my social life. However, by second year I had learned to manage my time a bit better, and found myself able to enjoy seeing friends, going to parties, and spending time on the activities I enjoy without the thought of all that work I hadn’t done yet hanging over my head! It really is about trying to find balance for yourself – if, like me, you aren’t one of those people who wakes up and wants nothing more than to practice kanji for three hours, don’t worry! Just create a loose schedule and make sure you do all the work you have to, and you needn’t feel guilty for having fun as well.

Do you need to do a lot of work in the vacations?

Generally, the faculty will set something relatively small for you to complete over the vacations, and it may be suggested to you that you complete any unfinished work from the year to ensure you haven’t missed sections of the course. But overall, the faculty seems fully aware that the relatively high workload over the terms means students need the vacations to relax!
King’s Student Perspectives

Modern and Medieval Languages: French and German
Hannah, 2\textsuperscript{nd} year

MML at King’s is really, really good. The course itself is great, and the college organises it very well and has a lot of resources in terms of books and films, but also in terms of staff.

What attracted you to the course?

I was originally attracted to Modern Languages at Cambridge because of the huge variety within the course; you can cover literature spanning a millennium, film, philosophy, linguistics and history, not to mention the papers which you can “borrow” from other faculties, including Human Rights in the Middle East, Medieval Welsh and Latin American history. What you study is very much down to you; there is a lot of choice and scope to specialise. Although the course is geared towards literature, the language side of things is not neglected, especially in the first two years, and by fourth year you are fluent enough to be translating things like Dickens into your chosen language.

What papers did you take?

In first year I did literature for both French and German (although the structure has changed now and first years do a mix of literature and linguistics). That covered literature from the medieval period up to the 21st century, which gave me a brilliant overview, and a chance to see what I might want to do in second year. I never thought I’d end up doing medieval literature and historical linguistics, but that’s what I ended up doing, and they were both really, really interesting papers, especially the medieval French (Fr3), full of stories about knights in shining armour as well as women’s writing, all from before 1300. We even got to go and look at manuscripts in one of the college libraries, which was incredible. I also did Du5, an introduction to Dutch language and literature, which was probably my favourite paper. There are several languages you can take from scratch, and doing Dutch really gave me a sense of achievement - while continuing with your other two languages, you learn another from a total beginner, and get to A level standard in an academic year, as well as reading several books - amazing!

By fourth year you are fluent enough to be translating things like Dickens into your chosen language.

I never thought I’d end up doing medieval literature and historical linguistics, but that’s what I ended up doing, and they were both really, really interesting papers.

You get to A level standard in an academic year, as well as reading several books - amazing!
What was it like at the beginning?

*It definitely takes some time to get to grips with your style and supervisors' expectations, but everyone is in the same boat, and there's the whole year to work it out.*

When you arrive in Cambridge at the beginning of first year, there is so much going on that it isn't unusual to feel a bit lost - I know I struggled with my first essay. I had never written a 2000 word essay before, so I had nothing to compare my work to, and I didn't feel at all on top of the book it was about. But after a minor panic during the writing, the supervision was fine - we just built on what I'd written and my supervisor picked up on things I'd missed. It definitely takes some time to get to grips with your style and supervisors' expectations, but everyone is in the same boat, and there's the whole year to work it out, as none of the essays count towards your end of year mark.

About the teaching and workload

Supervisions are excellent, if a scary prospect. They are much more relaxed than I expected them to be – as long as you do the work, they are enjoyable. The idea is not to submit an essay that perfectly covers every point imaginable, but to build on your essay and further the points you made in dialogue with your supervisor – who will usually know far more than you!

As well as supervisions (almost all of which happen in college in first year), you will have language and translation classes in the faculty, oral supervisions in college and lectures on your “scheduled papers” (i.e. options) in the faculty, which adds up to about 14 hours of contact time a week. You are expected to do more than twice that amount of your own work.

And the social life?

If you manage your time well, there is still plenty of time for extra-curricular things and a social life. It is a very manageable degree if you go about it the right way. I have done a lot of sport in Cambridge, playing netball and football for King’s and fencing for the university; I was captain of the fencing team in my second year and still had time to go on swaps (meals in hall at other Colleges) and hang out with college and course friends.

*The idea is not to submit an essay that perfectly covers every point imaginable, but to build on your essay and further the points you made in dialogue with your supervisor.*

I would recommend the Arts Picturehouse, which shows a reasonable number of foreign language films as well as independent cinema. The King’s MML department is sociable, and there is quite a lot of integration between years, which is really nice. At the end of term, the fellows organise a “pudding party” for the department within college, which is lovely.

*The King’s MML department is sociable, and there is quite a lot of integration between years, which is really nice.*
Practical issues

The MML department is on the Sidgwick Site, just over 5 minutes’ walk from King’s. The MML library is incredibly well stocked and covers almost everything you will need for your whole degree; anything else is in the University Library. King’s library has pretty much everything you need for first year, and if there is something it does not have but you need, in most cases the librarians will buy the book in for you.

The Year Abroad

One of the best bits about MML is the Year Abroad in third year. There is incredible scope – you can do pretty much anything pretty much anywhere, as long as you are speaking the language and doing something vaguely useful. It is a chance to get out of what can become the Cambridge bubble and to experience another country and everything that comes with that, and to have a break from your degree – which often helps you to appreciate your final year all the more.

During your Year Abroad there are three options: working as an assistant teacher through the British Council scheme, studying at a foreign university or working, which gives you huge amounts of freedom. I went to the south of France and studied for a year as well as doing an internship in Paris; one of my friends taught in Paraguay, one worked with a newspaper in Rome, another studied at a performing arts school in St Petersburg... You are free to do pretty much anything, as long as the faculty considers it appropriate.

While you’re abroad, the only thing you have to do that counts for Cambridge is to prepare for your oral exam, which you do at the end of September (so just as fourth year starts), and to write a dissertation of 8000 words on your chosen subject, so there is plenty of time to throw yourself into your year.

What about the application process?

The application process is pretty painless. I would advise you to keep your personal statement as academic as you can, and demonstrate your passion for the subject. In terms of preparation, you don’t need to read Madame Bovary 4 times or spend every summer in Italy from the age of 3, you just need to be able to talk about what you have done – whether you’ve read some poetry, seen some films or followed the politics of the country concerned, you need to have something to say about it. Devoting some time to your languages and the cultures that go with them will also help you decide whether you really do want to spend four years doing exactly that.
King’s Student Perspectives

Classics (3 year course)
Jack, 2nd year

How did you get interested in Classics at Cambridge?
At school I had always been torn between mathematical and essay-based subject choices, and felt uncomfortable giving up subject areas I enjoyed in order to focus on others. It was the balance between analytical translation techniques and creative essay writing in my Latin lessons at school that first sparked an interest in Classics as a degree. After some research, Cambridge really stood out. It was the breadth of the Classics course at Cambridge that appealed to me, as it offered an opportunity to concentrate on areas of particular interest while still covering a huge range of academic disciplines and topics. The faculty at Cambridge stressed this unique balance between subject diversity and specific interests, encouraging students in their first years (for both the 3 and 4 year courses) to explore diverse subjects ranging from Pre-Socratic philosophy to philology.

Why did you choose King’s?
King’s has one of the larger intakes for Classics students compared to other Cambridge colleges and has both a rich history in classical scholarship and an exceptional group of current professors. Having more people on the course was a major attraction and being able to discuss difficult topics and sharing thoughts on essay questions with other classicists over the past two years has offered great insight. This community feel amongst King’s classicists between different years and disciplines creates a truly relaxed and supportive environment. Moreover, having visited King’s on an open day I decided there were few more inspiring places to live and work for three years.

What is it really like on the course?
I had no idea about how high the levels of contact time would be in my first year. Taking intensive Greek – a course designed for those without A-level or equivalent Greek – meant I had six hours of contact time during the week including supervisions and language classes. Although the workload was tough, continual contact with supervisors created a considerate dynamic where I felt at ease to speak openly about any difficulties with the work. I never feel like I am sending my essays to anonymous marking machines, even if I wished some essays were!

Supervisions are my favourite part of the Cambridge course and are what mark out the university as a class apart from other institutions. Writing an essay that you know will be discussed in a supervision encourages you to really find the examples behind the conviction and pursue logical lines of argument. Supervision techniques can vary depending on the supervisor, but the recurrent theme is about helping the student get to grips and feel more confident with a subject. Some supervisors spend the majority of
the time talking while others continually propose questions. However, the end result is always a greater understanding on the topic at hand. It can feel at times as if you are being put on the spot, but likewise the supervisors do not expect you to conjure answers out of the air. As with the interview process, supervisions are conversational in form; they are intended primarily to compliment the work you have achieved over the week, rather than purely critique it. No matter how well an essay has gone over the week, I always leave supervisions with far greater insight into the question.

How much work do you have each week?

In my first year a usual week consisted of one essay of around 2000 words, three or four translation exercises, and a practical criticism (a short essay analysing the language, structure and content of a passage of Latin or Greek). On top of this I had around 7-10 hours of lectures a week and two intensive Greek language classes, as I hadn’t studied Greek at A-level. My second year is much the same in terms of weekly contact time and essay work, although I have fewer lectures to attend as a result of specialising in subject areas.

How do the academic expectations at Cambridge differ to what you experienced at school?

The greatest change in academic expectations is the personal responsibility that you have to take for your work. Although there is a great deal of contact time at Cambridge compared to other universities, there is still a large amount of work in Classics that is left entirely up to the student. This is mainly language work and personal reading of set texts. Despite the focus on essays during the week, you are expected to keep on top of your Greek and Latin language, especially in the run up to exams. This is one of the toughest requirements of the course as it lies behind the more patent responsibilities of essay deadlines and lectures.

At school, the entire year often builds up uniformly to the horizon of exams. This is very different to Cambridge, where exams have a tendency to creep up on the Classics student unaware. Your work during the first two terms is much more focused on supervision preparation than exams.

I think that it is important to look at the exams in Classics for the first two years in a different light to exams at school. Supervisors, especially those at King’s, want to discourage you from the regimented and highly structured form of A-level or equivalent learning. In a supervision it feels like you are discussing something just because it is interesting or helpful to your understanding. I found the exams to be a chance to showcase some of the hard work I’d done over the year, but the experience of working on each essay and translation as a whole and having discussions with supervisors was far more rewarding as an experience than seeing how I performed over four days in June.

What about the social life?

Despite the admirable efforts of many ardent club-goers (sometimes myself included), Cambridge is not Ibiza – probably not even Watford (near my home). In spite of this unsurprising truth, there is always something to do if you have the time, and Cambridge has a way of providing unique and varied ways to relax, from tea societies to mountaineering. In Classics the workload tends to remain relatively constant week to week and, thus, so does the time you have to relax.
Of course, the nature of the course means that how much additional work or preparation you want to do is up to you. That said, a solitary year spent in the library is neither a prerequisite nor even guarantee for success, and finding the right balance to work and play, though difficult, is the often the difference between enjoying your degree rather than getting through it.

King’s is without a doubt one of the most sociable colleges. With the majority of student accommodation in college or very close and a large bar, it requires very little effort to meet with friends and have an enjoyable evening. In addition, the bar is often venue to weekly events from pub quizzes and karaoke to music performances, all hosted and organised by students at the college. There are countless intra-college societies, sports teams and clubs to join and become a part of, all of which are characterised by the most important quality of student life at King’s: the incredibly friendly nature of all the students.

My favourite way to spend any free time is playing sports. I have weekly commitments to a university sports team (Cambridge Eton Fives) for whom I have about four hours of practise each week and spend Saturdays travelling for fixtures. On top of that, King’s has great sports facilities in and around the college, and I often have time to play squash, tennis or football during the week with friends from King’s.

**Where are you living this year?**

My room this year is in New Garden Hostel. New Garden is just over the river, looks out over the fellows’ garden and is a popular choice for second year undergraduates. I’m really pleased with my room choice for this year and enjoy boasting about my domestic amenities, which include an en suite bathroom and a balcony with views over the fellows’ garden. Compared to first year in the Keynes building, this year I live five minutes closer to my lecture site but five minutes further from the bar, and consequently find myself walking considerably more.

**The application process**

The crux of the application process for Classics is a set of interviews, both at the college you have applied to and at one other. The prospect of interviews with leading academics was a daunting one for me. However, all the interviewers understand how anxious candidates can be and are incredibly accommodating. At King’s my interviews were relaxed and informal; the interview is like a Cambridge supervision and I was encouraged to both speak about topics I was comfortable with and to get to grips with more unfamiliar.

I was worried that the interviews would focus on how much I already knew about Latin, Greek and the Classical world yet, while it is important to show a passion for the subject, the interviewers really wanted to focus on how I worked though questions and developed my responses. Apprehensive about a barrage of specific questions that I imagined might be met with muted
silence, I was pleased to find that instead the interview was incredibly relaxed and it felt as if both myself
and the interviewer were working together towards answers, through conversation not interrogation.

How did you prepare for the interviews?

I highlighted a few topics that particularly interested me and did some research around them. Despite the
breadth of Classics all the various topics are strongly interrelated, so any specific area that I had
researched or especially enjoyed was easily worked into answers in the interviews. In general, however, I
refrained from heavy preparation or learning answers by rote – the interviewers mainly want to ascertain
your capacity to learn rather than gauge what you already know. My main advice would be to refrain
from trying to learn every emperor since Augustus or reading through the dictionary. Instead, pick a few
subjects that generally interest you, whether they are related to subjects on your course at school or
completely different.

How did you find the first few days?

Despite the grand and imposing, though equally beautiful,
surroundings of the chapel and hall I was initially confronted
with, all the freshers were made to feel completely at home in
college in the first few days. Everyone who had just arrived
was eager to make friends; and everybody in the second year
was eager to organise events to make that happen. Not only
does the college family system introduce you to other freshers,
but it can be the start of great friendships between years – one
of the admirable differences between sixth form and
university. In addition, freshers’ week is a chance to sign up to
tons of clubs and societies both in college and across the
University. Almost everybody signs up to more things than they would ever be able to keep up, but it’s
still a great chance to meet new people.

I began to feel that I had built up a solid group of friends about two weeks in – even if remembering all
their names remained a trial! However, one of the unique sides of Cambridge life, which comes as a
result of living in student accommodation throughout the length of your course, is never limiting how far
you can ‘settle in’. Every term I’ve managed to meet new people and some of my best friends were those
that I met at the beginning of my second year. Although freshers’ week is the first and easiest occasion to
socialise on a big scale, it is far from the last.

What aspects of studying Classics are the most difficult?

The most difficult and demanding aspect of the course is balancing the set texts that you are expected to
read in the original language with weekly essays on different subjects such as philosophy, history or
archaeology. There is a fine balance between the reading up on vocab, grammar and set texts to further your linguistic
capabilities whilst still coping with the pressures of essay topics. However, it is the essay topics that make Classics so
appealing to me. The breadth of the course means that I can be studying the Aeneid one week and Pompeian frescoes the
next – all with academics who are leading in their field. The essay/supervision structure for these interesting topics pushes
you into becoming expert in a particular topic in a week.
Although this can seem a daunting task at first, each week ends with a feeling of incredible accomplishment.

The hardest thing at the beginning, was being unsure about what each supervisor expected in terms of work: I was unsure if I should be spending two hours or half an hour on a translation, or how many words my essays should be. However, the short and intense terms at Cambridge meant that this didn't last long - I quickly came to understand the various expectations of supervisors. Becoming familiar with these expectations enabled me to really plan my working week and get the most out of the time I did spend working. Thus this year, although the work load is very similar, my techniques and organisation have progressed and I feel far more at ease with the demands of the course.
What attracted you to the course?

I was always attracted to the idea of studying at Cambridge, which I knew from a young age to be one of the best universities in the world, and I found myself particularly attracted to the university given my interest in foreign languages.

Having long enjoyed studying foreign languages, and in particular their literature, I was attracted to the Cambridge course precisely for this traditional focus: whilst the course involves translation and language elements, and students so inclined are free to study linguistics and history, the Cambridge course also offers an enormous range of possibilities to explore the literature and thought of other cultures.

I was keen to keep up both French and Spanish, and whilst other universities allow you to study two languages, the MML course is built around this. Furthermore, the unique second “M” in the course title held special intrigue for me: I had an interest in what people thought and wrote before the modern era, and this interest in medieval literature and thought has been something that I have been able to develop in more depth on the Cambridge course.

How do the first two years of MML work?

The MML course always involves two languages, which can either be one ab initio (from scratch) and one post A-level, or both post A-level (the option I chose). Doing two post A-level languages means that in the first year you will study approximately half language (translation, oral and use of language) and half literature/linguistics. There isn’t much choice for the papers you take in first year - in my year I had no choice in French and only one choice in Spanish, but within the papers themselves there is a reasonable amount of scope to choose what you study - which books, whether you study linguistics or not etc. Of course, this will depend in part on which languages you are studying, but it was certainly the case for French and Spanish.

Once in second year, the selection of papers that you can study widens vastly. You must still take the prescribed language papers (which include a translation paper and an “audiovisual media” paper, which is basically a glorified listening test with video as well as audio, although quite difficult). In literature and

I was able to study medieval Spanish literature, Occitan literature (Occitan is a medieval dialect similar to Catalan from the region of Provence) and early modern French philosophy.
linguistics, the choices are numerous - I was able to study medieval Spanish literature, Occitan literature (Occitan is a medieval dialect similar to Catalan from the region of Provence) and early modern French philosophy, but if your tastes are more modern then the papers range through literally every period of French and Spanish literature from the 21st century back to around the 11th.

How does the language teaching work?

The MML course is taught through a variety of supervisions, classes and lectures, although you will have to learn most of the material in your own time, given that much of the content is actually reading books. Language teaching mainly happens through classes of around 14 people at the faculty, teaching you how to translate and also the finer points of French, Spanish or whatever other grammar. Translation classes will give you a passage every fortnight to translate and hand in, whilst “Use of…” classes will give you a variety of tasks including cloze tests (where you have to fill in missing words) and short essays of approximately 250 words. You will also have oral supervisions where you will discuss a topic with a native speaker of your chosen languages, preparing you for your oral exams. These sessions are very useful for refining your language to a much greater level than is easily achievable in school, giving you greater fluency and range of expression.

Are there many lectures?

Lectures are sparser for MML than for many other subjects. Language is hardly lectured at all, being mainly taught through classes, but there will be grammar lectures in some terms in your first year. The main body of your lectures will be for your scheduled papers, i.e. literature, linguistics etc. These lectures are often by experts in the field who have authored eminent analyses of the primary texts that you will be studying, so although they certainly are not compulsory, I have found it useful to attend as many of them as I possibly can. You should avoid just repeating lecture material in your essays, though, as you will then blend somewhat into the crowd and can fail to really look into the material yourself if you rely on a second-hand account of it, so my advice is to use the lectures but don’t be enslaved by them.

Lectures are often by experts in the field who have authored eminent analyses of the primary texts that you will be studying.

And supervisions?

Supervisions for your scheduled papers will involve you writing an essay on a text or topic from the course that your supervisor will set, and then discussion of your essay and wider issues relating to the text in the supervision. Good supervisors will really challenge you to deepen your understanding of the text, asking you searching questions about interpretative and thematic issues. There are rarely easy answers to the analysis of literature, and so supervisions can often lead to quite profound discussion around the text itself or beyond, and you may find yourself defending your position against a supervisor who disagrees with it and who tries to take

Good supervisors will really challenge you to deepen your understanding of the text, asking you searching questions about interpretative and thematic issues.
your case apart - but that is okay! As long as your position is defensible, you should feel free to argue your case.

Overall I am finding supervisions to be extremely intellectually stimulating and worthwhile, and they really deepen my understanding of the texts in question as well as significantly improving my ability to write an essay and make an argument. Be warned though; if you haven’t really prepared your essay well, or don’t know what you’re talking about, it is better to admit it upfront rather than be caught out, because your supervisors are not dupes, and will pick up on it. If all of this sounds a bit intimidating, don’t worry - the supervisors are human beings and will not pick on you or shout at you; they just want to help deepen your understanding and thinking skills, and will do their best to help you.

Where do the different elements of your teaching take place?

The lectures are on the Sidgwick Site, as are the classes, whilst in first year your supervisions will probably be in King’s. In your second year, as you specialise more, your Director of Studies may send you to other colleges for your supervisions to work with particular specialists, depending on your paper choices, but this means you will be getting the very best teaching on the subject.

What is the teaching like at King’s?

In your first year much of your teaching will come from King’s supervisors, so it will matter being here. King’s is an excellent place to learn French and Spanish - the supervisors I had in my first year were very helpful in developing my reading and writing skills, and I would very much look forward to my supervisions with them. Once in your second year it depends on your interests and you may well be spending more time outside of King’s, however you will still be able to make use of a good MML section in the impressive King’s College library. Also, if you are interested in the aforementioned Occitan or other medieval French literature, then Dr William Burgwinkle, one of the fellows at King’s, is a specialist and expert in those fields, and an excellent supervisor.

You must show interest in the language and culture (whether that be literature, linguistics, or history etc.)

What advice would you give to students applying for MML at King’s?

Applying to King’s normally requires you to send in some sample essays, and, in most cases, come for an interview and also do a small admissions test on the same day. The admissions test will involve reading a passage, summarising it in the target language and then writing an essay on a related topic. This just requires you to be able to think a bit creatively, as the chances of you knowing much about the topic are relatively small. The interview will involve reading a short passage in your chosen language prior to interview and discussing it with your interviewer, as well as perhaps some grammar tests. These test both your linguistic aptitude and your thinking skills - the interviewers want to see what you’ll be like to teach. There is no great secret to doing well in this - you must show interest in the language and culture.
(whether that be literature, linguistics, or history etc.) and you must show that you can be taught and discuss ideas well in the interview environment, as that is something of a foretaste of your supervisions.

If you want to have some control of what you discuss at interview, my advice is to put something interesting in your personal statement. Read a book and mention it in your personal statement. Your interviewer may decide to discuss it with you. [Warning for prospective French students - don’t just read L’Étranger; so many people have read this, so if you are going to read it then either read something else as well that you can discuss comparatively with it or understand it very, very well].

Basically, the interviewers will want to test how much you understand about what you read, and also how you can explore new ideas in relation to it. The elements of the subject that interest you are far more valuable to put in your personal statement that any amount of extra-curricular activity, since Cambridge is only interested in your academic potential.

The interviewers will want to test how much you understand about what you read, and also how you can explore new ideas in relation to it.

Cambridge is only interested in your academic potential.

What do you do when you’re not studying languages?

Although any Cambridge degree is pretty demanding, you will still find yourself with plenty of free time to make good use of. If you enjoy sports, there are a number of societies to join, and in particular rowing is a popular choice. I only rowed for my first two terms; whilst the experience of actually being in the boat rowing is very enjoyable, be warned- it isn’t for the faint-hearted. If you struggle to get up in the morning, imagine what it will be like rising at 6am in the middle of winter when ice forms on your back whilst you row! Nevertheless, it is a great way to make friends and also a morning outing will set you up nicely for a productive day of work and play to follow.

If you’re a musician, you will find yourself likewise well-catered for. There are numerous orchestras and choirs to join. I am a singer, and at first thought that, being at King’s and not being at the standard of King’s College Choir (very, very high), I wouldn’t have much chance to develop my singing. However, King’s Voices, the college’s mixed-voice choir, is a great place to do just that. The standard is quite high - likely higher than your choir at school if you had one - but it is still accessible for someone without special voice training, and allows you to sing in the Chapel once per week, as well as going on some amazing tours (I have been to Malta and France with them, both great occasions). Once again, in addition to the actual singing, the choir is a good place to make some friends; in fact as a rule of thumb, if you are worried about making new friends once you’re in Cambridge then joining some societies and getting stuck into them is a good way to do that.

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For me the most significant thing about my life, and by extension about my life at Cambridge, is my Christian faith. Christian student life is thriving in Cambridge, and there are lots of opportunities to get involved. I attend St Andrew the Great in the city centre, and have found it to be a wonderful community where I have made lots of friends, and have been able to grow in my faith and my knowledge of scripture. Secondly, there is the Cambridge Christian Union, or CICCU (Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union). CICCU is an organisation made up of constituent college Christian Unions, and it is a non-denominational union of evangelical Christians. We try to put on various events (talks, dinners, sports events etc.) so that friends can hear the gospel and come to understand what it is that Christians claim about Jesus and the claims he makes on people’s lives.

What is King’s like?

It is always difficult and dangerous to make broad generalisations about colleges, as they are collections of hundreds of diverse people. Nevertheless, with this in mind I would like to make some broad brush points about the atmosphere and culture of King’s.

King’s is generally a pretty relaxed college. As a student here, you are given lots of support and academic stimulation – people here are enthusiastic and work hard - but you are equally expected to be something of an adult and decide for yourself how much you are going to put into your degree and, thus, how much you will get out. King’s also has a well-deserved reputation for being a College which throws some of the best parties, including the “Mingles” at the end of term, as well as the “King’s Affair”, a massive fancy dress party at the end of the year going right through the night and often involving Laser Quest, dodgems, music, dancing and lots of good food and drink.

King’s is also a notably political college, with lots of discussion on all kinds of subjects and many vocal and active students. The politics does lean very decidedly in a leftward direction- there is a Hammer and Sickle flag framed in the bar (though this itself is a regular focus of debate), and King’s students were some of the most strident in opposition to government tertiary education cuts. So if you are politically conservative (like me!), then you should be prepared either not to mention it too much, or to have to defend arguments a lot and hold your ground in discussion. I’ve found that this can be quite fun and stimulating if you are really interested and not too sensitive to have a good debate, though it can be a little isolating very occasionally. Nevertheless, I have friends of vastly differing opinions to my own with whom I get on very well, so this shouldn’t be a barrier to applying. And lots of my friends are not interested in politics at all, so if that’s you, you certainly won’t be on your own.

What cannot be denied is the incredible grandeur of the surroundings at King’s, not least the Chapel that towers above the surrounding buildings with great presence. Although not everyone is overawed by architecture, I think you’d have to be pretty hard to impress not to be
regularly wowed by the environment in which you find yourself. King’s is a wonderful place in which to study, and moreover it is a wonderful place simply to live.
King’s Student Perspectives

Human, Social and Political Sciences
Juan, 3rd year

Note from the Admissions Office: Juan specialised in Political Philosophy as part of our old PPS course which has now been replaced by Human, Social and Political Sciences (HSPS), and Psychological and Behavioural Sciences (PBS). Students interested in Politics now do this through the HSPS course which has the opportunity to study everything that Juan did with even more flexibility and breadth.

I write this after having just graduated from a degree in Politics, Psychology and Sociology at Cambridge. I can, with all honesty, say that I thoroughly enjoyed my course. Over the three years of my course, I was challenged and provoked in the best of ways.

The course is unique in its flexibility and breadth of scope, and most of its components are extremely well taught at Cambridge.

How did you come to choose the course?

I chose my course a little late in the application procedure. For most of my life I assumed I’d be a doctor, but I slowly realised it wasn’t for me. I then considered law, but after several failed attempts at forcing myself to become interested in dense and deathly dull law textbooks, I realised I simply found the subject (from its academic perspective) too boring. Memorising hundreds of cases and laws just wasn’t for me.

It took me a while to see that the books that I was reading for my own guilty pleasure were ones which spoke to PPS more than any other course, so I began investigating the course’s online prospectus.

The first thing that I noticed about the course was its breadth of topics. I saw that you could end up studying anything from gypsy migrations across Europe to the political philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment. Themes that interested me as a teenager, from social deviance to power, poverty and conflict, were all present in the course. I liked what I saw, and applied.

What was the course like when you got to Cambridge? Did you specialise?

Once I arrived at Cambridge I wasn’t disappointed. In first year you study four papers. Freshers are now given a choice – when I started, you were “highly recommended” to study the politics, psychology, sociology and social anthropology papers. The breadth of first year is useful – it helps to come to Cambridge with an open mind. Even if you think you really want to study a specific subject when you come here, give the other papers a chance!

Even if you think you really want to study a specific subject when you come here, give the other papers a chance!

Over the course of the three years I spent at Cambridge I personally found myself becoming increasingly interested in
political philosophy, and I ended up specialising in this area. It wasn’t due to lack of interest in other areas – social psychology was and remains of great interest to me, for example. But for some reason or another, political philosophy became ‘my’ subject. My friends forged their own paths through the Tripos. One decided his interest lay in sociology.

Another became an expert on Yemen and the Gulf area of the Middle East. A third specialised in global security and development, and travelled to Kenya to do original research in the impact of mobile phone technology on politics and business in rural areas (research that was funded by the university). A fourth chose to change subjects to anthropology, and a fifth ended up specialising in psychology.

**So how does it all work?**

Over the course of your degree you’ll have a great support team around you, from your supervisors to your Director of Studies – the person who organizes your subjects and makes sure there aren’t clashes (and if you have a problem with a supervisor, you can go to your Director of Studies).

You’ll generally have a supervision a week, with several lectures interspersed in between. Supervisions are small-group sessions with a teacher. Lectures are larger, where you sit in a lecture hall amongst most of the students of your year who study that paper. Supervisions are compulsory, lectures are not.

**Supervisions**

Supervisions are intense. You’re expected to provide a piece of work for them in advance (usually a 2000-3000 word essay that requires a lot of background reading), and during the supervision you should be prepared to defend the arguments you made in your work. Expect to have moments where you wish to curl up in your seat and disappear, but its all part of the learning process! In the build-up to exams, students invariably look back on their year and appreciate the supervisors who pushed them the hardest.

For each piece of work, you’ll normally be given a reading list. These usually contain about a page of titles. You’re not expected to read them all! Lectures are a great way of condensing information and finding out which texts are more important. One piece of advice I’d give is, when it comes to political philosophy in particular, focus on primary texts. I think this advice holds true for social anthropology and sociology as well. For contemporary politics papers and psychology papers this is probably a little less relevant. If in doubt, don’t hesitate to contact your supervisor and ask, or have a chat with an older student who has done your paper.
Is there time for other things?

The atmosphere in Cambridge is one of friendly competition. You work hard, but so do your friends. Don’t for a second think that the work means you can’t have fun at Cambridge – that’s a common misconception. In reality, there are plenty of opportunities to have fun and party at Cambridge. In the end, how much fun and how much partying you will do is less dependent on the subject you take than on your personality and your approach to the work/fun balance.

One of the major advantages of the course is that its flexibility means you’re very much in charge of your own time. This means two things: firstly, that you have to have the discipline to make yourself work in an unstructured day, and secondly, that, provided you’re organised enough, you have the freedom to pursue extra-curricular activities. Consequently, PPS students often end up holding plenty of positions in various societies or unions across the university.

Any advice for choosing a college?

Pick King’s, it’s the best. In all seriousness, though, when it comes to picking a college, don’t worry – statistically speaking, most people say their own college is the best and they couldn’t imagine going anywhere else... even amongst those who were randomly assigned their college. But I wouldn’t recommend making an ‘open application’. Instead, think a little about what you want – big or small college? Old or new?

I chose King’s because it’s big, central, beautiful, has a reputation for people who care about politics, has a rich history and a high proportion of international and state school students. But it’s a personal choice! Check out the prospectuses and the alternative prospectuses (these are written by students, and are often more honest than the official prospectus).

A major advantage of reading PPS at King’s College is that it always has the largest group of students who read PPS. This creates a community that you don’t always find in other colleges, and the community can be invaluable as people help one another. It also means there are always plenty of older students to seek advice from (if in doubt who they are, just ask at the bar).

Any tips for interviews?

Expect to be challenged in the interview. You’re not expected to have all the answers. If faced with a difficult question (as you undoubtedly will be), be honest and say you’re not sure of what the answer is, but don’t just then clam up – instead, try and venture guesses as to where you would find the answer (or how).

Remember (and this holds particularly true for arts subjects), the interviewers are not looking for an uncanny

Don’t for a second think that the work means you can’t have fun at Cambridge.

It’s a personal choice!

The community can be invaluable as people help one another.

What they’re really looking for is for people who can use information effectively to develop interesting, plausible, and original arguments.
ability to memorise information. If you have that ability, great, but what they’re really looking for is for people who can use information effectively to develop interesting, plausible, and original arguments. They want people who can challenge preconceptions and think differently. Also, quite often, if you need help with an answer, the interviewers might intervene – if this happens, don’t feel discouraged by any means. It happens a lot. Instead, use the new information or tip and try and work with that.

Finally, don’t worry if you haven’t studied politics, psychology or sociology before your interview. You don’t have to have done so to read the course at Cambridge. I certainly hadn’t.

**What happens after Cambridge?**

There’s a misconception that a PPS degree will make you unemployable. I’m typing this from Beirut, where I’m doing an internship monitoring the ongoing revolutions of the Arab Spring for the UN. At the same time, I’m doing freelance photojournalism for a magazine. In October I’m returning to Cambridge to do a Masters in Political Thought.

And my friends? The one who specialised in Yemen wants to work at Chatham House, a leading think tank. She’s already published an Op-Ed on the revolution for the Yemeni Times, and she runs a successful blog on ongoing events in the region. The one who went to Kenya for his research is returning to Denmark to do a Masters in security and development there. As I write this, another PPS friend happens to be in a pub with Bjork, or so his Facebook status tells me. The sociologist has just arrived in South Sudan (at time of writing its secession is complete and it has just achieved independence, thus becoming the newest country in the world). I think she wants to work at an NGO or something along those lines. In addition to these, you also have the ever-present stock of people who want to go into banking / consulting / politics.

Post-PPS life is extremely varied, but then again, with such a diverse course, you’d expect that, right? At the end of the day, I loved the course and I’m glad I did it. The past three years have been terrific.
King’s Student Perspectives

Philosophy
Becca, 3rd year

I’ve just completed my finals, having studied the Philosophy Tripos (course) for three years. I have enjoyed studying philosophy at Cambridge very much, and would recommend it to anyone with a strong interest in analytic philosophy and an enthusiasm for discussion.

When did you decide to apply for Philosophy at Cambridge?

I became interested in philosophy through studying Philosophy of Religion at A level. I enjoyed the rigorous line of thinking that the subject matter demanded, although I found the focus on religious philosophy constraining at times in that course. My further reading and discussions with teachers convinced me that I wanted to study philosophy at university, and the Cambridge course was attractive due to its analytic focus.

The decision to apply to Cambridge for Philosophy was one I made comparatively late. Before sixth form I hadn’t considered studying at Oxbridge to be a realistic possibility for me, and I had no sense of how competitive it was or where I would stand compared to other applicants.

Even during the application procedure I felt completely unsure of my chances, and it wasn’t until I arrived for interview and found myself in King’s bar debating the subject with a table of fellow applicants that I really decided that I wanted to study here.

In retrospect I would say that while the idea of Cambridge can seem very imposing, particularly to those who are unfamiliar with its application procedure, it’s definitely worth applying if you are genuinely excited at the prospect of studying philosophy in great detail and are prepared to commit to the work load associated with a Cambridge degree.

What was the application process like?

The application process for philosophy at King’s includes a test, interview and personal statement. The interview itself took half an hour, and consisted of two main philosophical questions which I was challenged on and pressed to justify my answers for. Like most people, I came out feeling that it hadn’t gone well, as I’d had to back-track a fair amount. Looking back, I now realise that the interviews are suprisingly similar to the experience of a supervision – the majority of the time is spent attempting to keep up and revise your position, at the end of which you’ll hopefully have a fuller understanding of the topic and how to defend your view.
In preparation for the interviews, I would suggest introducing yourself to some background ideas. All interviews push you beyond the knowledge you already have, so it is not necessary to have prior knowledge of the subject matter. However, I found it reassuring to have an idea of the subject area the questions related to, even though the interviewers rapidly departed from my comfort zone.

What is the course like?

In each of the three years we cover four subject areas, and have four supervisions in each. Generally, at the end of the year we then have five examinations, one on each of these four topics and an essay paper. In second and third year, you can replace one of the four subject modules with coursework, and the essay paper can be replaced with a dissertation. You can borrow certain modules from other Cambridge courses (such as experimental psychology), but that might also mean that you take different exams and course work for a module. You can also replace the essay paper.

In first year, the four courses studied are Logic, Metaphysics, Ethics and Set Texts. I found these to be a very good foundation, and have since found myself referring back to them a great deal.

In second year Logic and Metaphysics are once again compulsory, and two other modules are optional. I selected Political Philosophy as well as Experimental Psychology. While I found the Logic and Metaphysics challenging and often wondered how relevant they were, I have since been grateful that they were compulsory, as elements of second year logic and metaphysics have come up in all my third year options.

This year, I studied Political Philosophy, Aesthetics, History of Modern Philosophy and took coursework in Ethics.

I most enjoyed Political philosophy, and in particular debates in Feminism concerning issues such as gender roles, pornography, and how feminism might be approached within a broader liberal framework.

In each year we have four supervisions, each for an hour, in our four modules. We submit an essay 24 hours prior to each supervision. All our supervisions take place in the first two terms, two subjects being covered each term. This is different to other subjects, and means that we are frequently supervised on topics which we haven’t been lectured on. This can make the topics a little inaccessible at first, so it is often necessary to find more introductory texts than are suggested on the reading list.

Supervisions can be a little daunting, but there is a huge

I believe supervisions have played the greatest role in improving my philosophical abilities, and I consider them the most challenging and enjoyable aspect of my study here.
sense of achievement after a successful one, in which some problematic area has fallen into place or you’ve presented an interesting argument. I have found supervisions very useful not only in allowing me to develop my own views in the face of rigorous questioning, but also in helping me appreciate the merits of views I disagree with by having them presented to me very convincingly by someone far more qualified than myself.

Although they might be a little foreboding, I believe supervisions have played the greatest role in improving my philosophical abilities, and I consider them the most challenging and enjoyable aspect of my study here.

What is it like to be a student at King’s?

I have found the atmosphere in King’s to be friendly and relaxed, and I have enjoyed a welcoming attitude in all societies and events I have been to. I have found this particularly encouraging when wanting to try new things, as people aren’t overly competitive. King’s also has a more relaxing atmosphere during exam term. Weekly exercise classes are provided for stress relief, and we also have ‘chapel chill-out’- chat and bubble wrap in the chapel once a week.

I have enjoyed studying philosophy at King’s and I’m really pleased that three other philosophers began at the same time as me. As King’s is a large college, you can be more certain of having one or more fellow philosophy freshers to share books and discuss the workload with. King’s also has a discussion group, Philosopher Kings, in which undergraduates as well as graduates present papers for discussion. I have found these to be interesting, challenging and a great way to get to know other members of the faculty within College.
What attracted you to Law?

I have to admit that I wanted to study law initially because I wanted to be a lawyer, which is not actually a good reason to do a law degree. Then, when I researched the subject as an academic discipline and looked at what the course would involve, I wanted to study law because it lies behind or regulates pretty much everything we do, and I thought that it would be a really broad, varied and interesting subject to explore at university level.

I studied a few controversial law cases during my A level Law course, and I found it to be a much more thought-provoking subject than anything else I was doing in sixth form. I liked the idea of taking a subject at university which would be a challenge and also give me a lot of choice in the topics I could study.

What drew you to Cambridge / King’s?

Like many other people, the kudos of going to Cambridge was a major factor in my initial decision to apply: why would you not apply to one of the best institutions in the world? It is amazing to have the opportunity to study at Cambridge – the people who write your textbooks are the same people who supervise you in small groups, so you can be sure that you are getting the best teaching. This is a centre of excellence, and I think that anyone who has a real interest in their subject and has been dedicated to working hard at school and achieving the high grades needed for entry will be drawn to this institution.

When it came to colleges, I chose King’s because I came to look round a few colleges, and when I walked through King’s I decided that this was a place I could see myself walking through every day. I have not regretted the decision! I think that everyone loves the college they end up at, but the best way to decide where to go is to walk through the grounds and see if you can see yourself being happy there, for whatever reason. I think that King’s is one of the most friendly and open colleges here, however I didn’t know that when I applied, of course.

How is studying at Cambridge different to school?

My least favourite thing about school was having to study subjects I was not really interested in. Studying at university level is great because you get to really specialise and focus on the subject you have chosen as your personal area of interest.

The workload at Cambridge is a lot bigger than it was at my sixth form college. While you get a lot of academic and pastoral support as a student here, ultimately it is up to you to take an interest in the material and motivate yourself to get the work done. Unlike school, where you will be taught everything you need to know in classes, and will certainly go through everything needed for the exams with the
teachers, at Cambridge you have to take the initiative to do extra reading and thinking, as you always need to find that something to make your work stand out. We have lectures, of course, but they only really cover the bare minimum of what you need to know, and you are expected to read core textbooks, cases and academic writings to extend your knowledge and interests further, and to develop your own thoughts on the topics being discussed.

**What is the teaching like?**

Supervisions, as we call them, are one of the great things about studying at Oxbridge. These are frequent small group or one-to-one sessions with experts in your field and you’ll soon realise that they are invaluable. At first, I found it quite nerve-wracking to be in a room with a few extremely clever people, trying to make a sensible contribution to the discussion. However, as soon as I got used to having supervisions, I found that they are a really interesting way of learning.

Often we won’t cover all of the basics in one supervision, but will focus on something particularly controversial or novel. The best supervisions are ones where everyone is contributing and interested in the topic being discussed. I’ve found that in the more policy-based discussions in particular, everyone just bounces ideas off each other, and as a result you get to use the material in ways you’ve not previously thought of. This is great practice for thinking about questions in exams and gives you lots of new ideas which you can use in your future work.

In first year you have four supervisions a fortnight, then in second and third year there are five a fortnight. I think that on top of going to lectures, I spend around twenty hours on each supervision, however realistically some take more and some take less time, depending on my interest in the topic and how easy I find it. It is perfectly feasible to do less than this if you’re having a busy week. Supervisors understand if you’re struggling and haven’t done more than the core reading, however you are expected to catch up afterwards. Equally, if you find a particular subject area interesting, there is always scope to focus on that as reading lists can be as long as you wish them to be!

If you choose to do a dissertation in your third year as I did, then you will go to two-hour seminars in the faculty once a week. My seminar is on Criminal Law and Ethics, and there are nine of us who take part. In first term we looked at different areas of the criminal law, then in second term everyone presents their dissertation to the seminar group for comments and advice. Seminars are like a big supervision but without the core reading as everyone is doing different dissertations. The discussion can get just as heated as in supervisions though! We have debated whether it is worse to run over your mother negligently, or to intentionally steal someone’s snickers (all but one agreed that it’s better to intentionally steal the snickers), and whether it is justified for the state to ban British citizens from eating pizza and drinking alcohol in the interests of safeguarding our own welfare (we all enthusiastically agreed that we have a right to eat pizza!)
What about other aspects of College life?

Lawyers tend to sit with their college friends in lectures, and I have to say that don’t know the people from other colleges I’m supervised with particularly well. It varies a bit from person to person, but because my extra-curricular activities are all based in King’s, I meet people from other colleges less than some other students. In my first year I made friends from other colleges because I was on a law society committee, however. It depends what you do, but generally people’s closest friends are from within their college, which is hardly surprising given that everyone lives together. A ten-minute walk to another college quickly starts to feel like an epic trek!

At any university there will be times where things aren’t going well. You may be homesick, have financial problems, have work problems… the list is inexhaustive. I have made so many amazing friends in King’s who will drop everything if needed despite being busy, whether this is for a cup of tea or to take me to A&E (don’t ask!)

Living in a college means that you see your friends all of the time and will have a very wide range of friends from all backgrounds, years and subjects. There is always someone around (probably in the bar) to have a general moan to. I find the mix of subjects in College useful, as if I’m struggling with work-related problems, I don’t always want to talk to other law students!

I have also found that having extra-curricular activities that have nothing to do with work (rowing and running in my case) can be really helpful. These interests give you down-time to relax, and you will probably have a completely different set of friends connected to your hobbies.

What papers do lawyers take?

All students at Cambridge must study the seven core modules which law students at every UK institution will study. In the first year, everyone studies Criminal law, Tort law, Constitutional law, and Roman law. All four are compulsory, although Roman law is the only one which is particular to Cambridge – it is the sort of course that you either love or hate, but either way, it makes for some interesting ‘bar-chat’ knowledge! In second year all students study Land law and Contract law, and I also chose International law, Administrative law and Criminality, Sentencing and the Penal system.

This year (third year) all students are studying Equity (Trusts) and European law, then for my options, I have also chosen Jurisprudence, Intellectual Property and I am doing a dissertation on the criminalisation of Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide. Most students do not do a dissertation, however they are a fantastic option for people like me who hate exams, as you finish working on it a few weeks before exams and then have the advantage of having one less subject to study in those all-important final weeks!
If you want to do a dissertation, you choose from a few broad subject areas such as Criminal law, Public law or Women and the law, and you are then fairly free to choose what title to propose, which may then be selected. This year dissertation titles range from Pirates to Euthanasia, and from Corporate liability to prisoners’ voting rights.

**What kinds of things do you struggle with?**

I love studying law and I love being a student at Cambridge but the work can be extremely hard, and the workload itself is not easy! I particularly struggled with the workload at the beginning - I often felt like I just had pages and pages of notes which were devoid of meaning, and I would never know if I was going to get things done and meet my deadlines. While the workload gets bigger over the years, the good news is that you definitely get better at working and at organising your work. The work I did in my first year would take me a considerably shorter amount of time if I approached it now, and although I have more work this year than before, I also manage it much better.

My first work strategy is organisation: now I use a calendar, and I have learnt to write at the beginning of each fortnight what work I will do on which days. I can factor in sport and those all-important nights out etc, and being organised means that I don’t miss deadlines or have weekly panics about work. I don’t have times when I have to sit in the library all night, and I know in advance what I need to do to meet deadlines without being stressed out. Discipline is important, as there are no magic tips to getting through the work, you just have to sit and get on with it. So while the work gets harder through the course in some respects, it definitely gets easier in others: it is all about time management and organisation. My top tip would be to try to be organised from the start, and not decide in your final year that this is a great idea!

You get a feel for what the important part of a case is, and which bits of a textbook need more or less attention.

The second advantage of being further on in the course is that reading textbooks and cases also gets much easier over time. You get a feel for what the important part of a case is, and which bits of a textbook need more or less attention. This is just about being better at working, which comes with experience.

I think that what I find most difficult now, is balancing everything that I want to do, especially as it is my last year at Cambridge. The workload is manageable although big, but I also want to row, to run regularly, see my friends and take advantage of the many opportunities that Cambridge offers, such as interesting talks and fun events. Again, this is just about being organised but I admit that I tend to be a little too optimistic with how much I can do in a week! My advice is to take advantage of every opportunity over the three years you are here so that you don’t feel like you have to cram it all in during your final year, when you know you should probably be writing your dissertation.
What is your timetable like?

The timetable for a law student is very relaxed. I have nine lectures, one two-hour seminar, and two supervisions a week. Most students have five supervisions a fortnight but as I am doing a dissertation, I have less contact time. This timetable works well for me as I like working late at night, but some people prefer a more structured day. The teaching for law allows your timetable to be really flexible so it is very easy to get into a routine which suits you, whatever that might be.

However you like to organise your days, law is a book-heavy course and you need to put the hours in. This is just my opinion, but from what I’ve seen, the number of hours you work and your performance in exams are strongly correlated. If you don’t think that you will have the discipline to work hard then Cambridge is probably not the university for you. However, while law is a tough subject, there is a general culture here of working hard, which really helps you to make a lot of progress if you’re keen to do the course. It’s not like your friends will be going out every night while you’re in the library - you’ll all be in it together!

When you’re not studying, there are hundreds of sporting activities, political groups / societies, and law societies that you can join. Whatever you want to try here you will be able to do. I have found time to row, which I do four times a week. I did a lot of coaching on top of this in my second year as I was vice-captain of the boat club. This year I am secretary of the boat club. I have always had time to try the things I really want to do, and of course, these activities really help with job applications!

Unfortunately vacations aren’t really vacations - you have to work even in your first year, which is partly due to terms being so short (8 weeks) so you need to catch up. However, to compensate for this, we have almost four months off in the summer, so we can’t really complain.

How are you assessed?

Law is an examination subject. There is no coursework in the first two years, so it’s all down to end of year exams. Exam term is very stressful, but everyone will say that, for every subject. If you are considering applying to Cambridge, the chances are that at every university you apply to, exam term will be stressful. In the first year there are four three-hour exams, then five three-hour exams in the second year, and five in the third year (unless you do a dissertation which means you only do four exams).

Exams are awful, but Cambridge makes up for it with ‘May Week’ afterwards, which is a week of balls, wearing black tie and gowns, sitting by the river with a bottle of Pimms, and catching up on the TV you missed during term time!
How did you find the application process?

As a third year who also took a gap year, it is a while since I applied and perhaps I am not in the best position to talk about the application process as I know that it has changed. However, I can give a few general pointers:

When you're choosing a college, it is worth knowing that it really does not matter which college you are at - you will benefit from the same lecturers and academics because you are taught both at college and at university level. So you are free to choose the college you want to go to for whatever reason.

I think that King’s law is extremely relaxed by comparison with other colleges. I am quite a competitive person but I have to say that King’s is not very competitive at all. Students here enjoy sharing and discussing their ideas, and are generous in helping each other, which is really useful when you’re stuck and need help, or if you need to borrow a book! I have friends at other colleges with more law students, but I honestly think the atmosphere to study law at King’s is better – I appreciate the supportive environment here and it helps me to work well. Additionally, our library will buy the books you need so you don’t have to buy books (look at the price of law textbooks and you will see how important this is – especially due to the frequency of new editions).

I don’t really think there is a particular advantage for the course in studying or not studying law at school.

Then there’s the question of preparation and school subjects. I studied A level law which was useful for me because it sparked my interest in law, however I don’t really think there is a particular advantage for the course in studying or not studying law at school. Some people say universities hate it, others say you can’t demonstrate an interest for law if you have turned down the opportunity to study it. I think that if you can demonstrate that you have the intellectual ability and a genuine interest to study law, then whether you have the A level is irrelevant – so just take the A levels you want to do and think that you will do well in.

In terms of substantive usefulness, it is neither harmful nor helpful to have A level law; we do cover the course, but in about two weeks and in much more detail! Equally, if you’re thinking about having relevant work experience as part of your university application, this may serve to show your interest in law but remember that they are not interested in why you want to be a practicing lawyer – they want to know why you want to study law as an academic subject).

Be yourself at the interview.

The personal statement for your application should be personal. This sounds obvious, but don’t write what you think your potential Director of Studies wants to read. Really, they just want to get to know you and see how interesting you are. Similarly, really be yourself at the interview. Again, they want to get to know you and see how you would work in supervisions, which is about how you deal with answering unforeseen questions or approaching new issues on the spot. The interview

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They want to know why you want to study law as an academic subject.
probably won’t be easy, but it should be thought-provoking, and you want your interviewers to think you are interesting, so try to relax and be creative!

I suggest that prospective lawyers keep up to date with what is going on in the world of law and generally in the world, just because you will always get brownie points for citing something interesting and novel! Finally, it goes without saying that if you say in your personal statement that you have read Eve Was Framed or Learning the Law by Glanville Williams, you should probably read them before the interview!

**What will you do after you graduate?**

A definite perk of being a law student is that we are very employable, and a huge advantage of being a law society member is that you find out about internships, pathways into careers (both legal and non-legal), and higher education. The law faculty is also brilliant at advertising work placements, vacation schemes and mini pupilages, and the University has a great careers service. If you don’t know what you want to do, or alternatively if you know absolutely where you want to be but don’t know quite what to do to get there, then there is a lot of support while you’re here for finding relevant summer placements and accessing good careers advice.

While in the run up to exams most of my third year friends in other subjects will be panicking about getting employment after the course, I, like many other law students, already have a job lined up with an amazing firm. I did a couple of vacation schemes (internships) in the summer between my second and third year with law firms in London, and signed a contract before the start of the academic year. They are even paying for me to go to law school! This is fairly common, as is joining the bar. However it isn’t just about becoming a lawyer: another student in my year at King’s did an internship with Amnesty International over the summer and will be doing a masters in the US, and another has a job with an accountancy firm, so the options are pretty varied.

**Is a gap year worth considering?**

Yes! I took one, and whether before or after university, I can definitely recommend it if you’re at all interested. Even if you don’t have the travel bug, it’s an opportunity to go out and find it, or to go and do something you have always wanted to do, whether this is feeding cuddly animals in a conservation site in Africa, singing on a cruise ship for a year or working in industry for a few months.

I did Camp America then travelled through the southern states, worked at home then worked for a Human Rights Law NGO in Ghana for a few months before travelling in West Africa. My gap year was one of the best years of my life, I met some amazing people, and it definitely helped me to grow up before university. Everything I did also helped on my CV and gave me something to talk about in interviews other than my degree – personally, I don’t think I would have got the job I have lined up without my gap year experience!
As I write this I’m four days away from graduating, having completed a BA in Music at King’s College, Cambridge. It sounds illustrious and prestigious and all sorts of things that I never expected to have to my name, and somehow doesn’t go any way to summing up the three years I’ve had here.

How did you decide on a Music degree?

I didn’t know I wanted to study music until a couple of weeks before the application deadline. Music had always just been a hobby, something I did to cheer myself up in my spare time. Around GCSE time, I was convinced that I wanted to be a physics teacher, and chose my A-levels accordingly: Physics, Maths, Further Maths, French and Music. I ended up dropping Physics after the first term, and got more and more involved in the music department. I liked playing in school bands (I play the piano and saxophone), but hated the pressure of solo performing, so I found other ways to get involved in shows and productions, like fire-stewarding, front-of-house and designing tickets and publicity.

I knew that I wanted to go to university - I always quite liked school and learning. Through sixth form, I got increasingly curious and knowledge-hungry, but I still wasn’t sure what I was aiming for. As more people started asking me what I wanted to do once I left school, I decided that I wanted to choose a subject to study at university based on what I enjoyed doing, rather than what job I wanted to land at the end of it. As a bonus, it turns out there are actually some jobs for music graduates out there.

Music isn’t often given enough credit for its variety and depth as a subject. Once I’d decided that I wanted to study music at university, I found that most courses were divided into three big strands - performance, composition, and musicology. I really liked the look of the course at Cambridge, because it really shows how big the musicology strand is, and this is what most of the papers on offer explore. But Cambridge still manages to get the most reluctant composers (like me) writing music, and provides some incredible performance opportunities no matter what your experience or technical level.

I really liked the Music Faculty as well. The whole building is quite modern, built right next to the old music faculty building, which...
looks like a cute detached house and now houses the administration offices for the faculty. The library is a really nice, light space with a huge number and variety of resources, lovely staff, and an ‘annex’ where you can use keyboards with headphones and iMacs. The faculty doubles as a concert venue. As students you can access the Concert Hall (incidentally, where we do our exams, on the stage) and Recital Room, and the very nice pianos that live there. The foyer has a small coffee shop too, which is an absolute life-saver for morning lectures.

The course structure itself suited me really well, especially as I came straight from school with no gap year, and no real idea of what specific area(s) of music I wanted to study. The first year is a little different now - when I first started all the papers were compulsory; now one of them allows you to choose an extended essay, composition or performance - but it is still divided into six papers, which cover a range of historical, technical and practical subjects.

You’re taught in a mixture of lectures, classes and supervisions. Lectures take place at the Faculty (a ten-minute walk from College, and that’s if you walk slowly) with your whole year group, so about 70 people. Classes are smaller - usually fifteen to twenty people in a classroom and you get to be a bit more involved. Supervisions are what a Cambridge education is famous for, one-on-one tuition (some supervisors prefer to work with small groups of 2 or 3 students) with someone who really knows what they’re talking about.

How was the transition from school to Cambridge Music?

I found the jump from school to first year quite tricky: I could pretty much keep up with the teaching for historical papers, learning about which composers lived when and getting to know their music, but a lot of the composition and practical skills seemed way above my head for a while. At school we were taught to harmonise four-part chorales in the style of J. S. Bach. While this wasn’t a very in-depth education, it certainly helped. In hindsight, I wish I’d taken it further in my own time.

I noticed very early on that for a music student, I really didn’t know a lot of music. My piano teacher had introduced me to things like sonata form, what to expect from the movements of a symphony and so on, but things would have been a lot easier if I’d been better acquainted with ‘classical’ repertoire. The introductory pack I received suggested miniature scores of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven - my advice is to start early, get to know one or two works really well then you can use them as useful models and points of reference in a large portion of the first year papers.

And supervisions?

I really appreciated supervision time, where once a week or once a fortnight someone takes time to answer all your questions thoroughly and monitors your work throughout the year to make sure things are sinking in! In first year, I wrote three or four 1,500-word essays (on average I read four or five
chapters or articles for each), and had two or three practice harmony and counterpoint exercises a fortnight. Each piece of work was marked and discussed with a supervisor. This happened in a group of three with the other two King’s “musos” in my year for essay subjects, and individually for the harmony and counterpoint papers. This sort of workload was new to me, especially without a teacher telling you what to read, where to find it, when to read it and so on, but I felt that I was eased into it at the beginning of the year and I became good friends with the other two music students very quickly, so we helped each other through the whole process.

What is the later part of the course like?

As you get into second and third year, you’re allowed more and more choice over what you study. The papers I’m currently studying are Music Aesthetics, Miles Davis, Mozart’s Don Giovanni, and The Music of Chopin. I’ve submitted a dissertation on film music (specifically, Aliens, Titanic and Avatar), and a composition portfolio, consisting of songs written in the style of Edward Elgar - so the papers are specific, but varied. The lecturer of each paper is an expert in their field, and they’re so passionate about it that learning from them is really exciting and interesting. This is important, because in third year you also have a lot more control over your own learning. You have less supervision time, as lectures are generally replaced by seminars. In theory these are discussion groups with about 10-15 people, but some of the papers I took were so popular that the ‘seminars’ were actually lectures or classes. The emphasis shifted from essays to presentations, so where in first and second year you did your research, wrote your essay and maybe chatted a bit with an understanding supervisor, in third year you do your research, give your speech then fend off difficult questions from 20+ fellow students, who, like you, have just spent over two years being taught to think outside of the box and to question everything. Once we hit exam term, however, I feel that I was more prepared, given that I’d been forced to practice thinking rather than writing. If you can manage to learn how to write a decent essay in your first two years then come finals you can be more adventurous with your exam answers and get your teeth into some of the bigger and more complex issues in music.

What is College life like?

As great as the Music course is, the main thing I’ll remember about my time in Cambridge is King’s. When people find out you’re at Cambridge, they don’t seem to care what you study - it’s all about which college you’re at, where your allegiances lie. It’s tricky to describe the role a college plays - from doing tours of the college for Open Days I’ve found that the best summary is ‘a mini University’, so ‘Cambridge University’ is an umbrella term for all the 31 individual colleges. They’re so much more than halls of residence. Yes, you
live there, but it’s where you make your first friends, and each have their own student unions, colours, societies, sports teams, rules, traditions, quirks, and reputation.

I didn’t really choose King’s. In Year 12 an opportunity came up to go on the ‘Shadowing Scheme’ (run by the Cambridge University Student Union)*. This was back when I was interested in science so I ended up following a BioNatSci (biologist, to the rest of the world) around for two days. I stayed in Keynes, which is where most King’s first years live, ate in Hall, went to lectures and seminars with her, and even to a French class at the language centre. We went to the cellar bar in King’s (now re-branded and re-launched as ‘The Bunker’) where my instructions were “Don’t drink...” - I was 16 - “...and don’t touch the walls”. I loved it. Everyone I met was laid back, very easy to talk to, very welcoming and very proud of their college. It was a bit infectious, and even when I came to an Open Day, I didn’t really look at other colleges.

* Note from the Admissions Office: King’s continues to welcome talented students from schools without a tradition of top university entry to stay in College and ‘shadow’ a student studying their subject. For information about the Shadowing Scheme, please see http://www.applytocambridge.com/shadowing/

The lifestyle here is new and exciting but also made very comfortable. Accommodation is provided for the entirety of your time at King’s, and the variety of places you can live is wonderful. Whatever your priorities, there will be something that suits you. Music students and choral scholars have a separate room ballot to the rest of the college, with special rooms reserved for us all over the college. Each one contains a piano which is tuned each term. On top of this, you can practise on the Steinway concert grand in Hall, the baby grand in Keynes Hall, or either of the basement practice room pianos.

I was never particularly bothered about an ensuite or state-of-the-art kitchen so I chose some of the older parts of the college. Last year I was in A-Staircase, which overlooked King’s Parade, and this year I live on a creaky wooden staircase in Bodley’s court overlooking the river, in a room that is actually two rooms, each with its own fireplace.

Most of the undergraduates here are living away from home for the first time, so there are bound to be problems - medical, psychological, social - on top of any academic issues. Throughout your time here, the support you get from King’s is amazing. Most of the undergraduates here are living away from home for the first time, so there are bound to be problems - medical, psychological, social - on top of any academic issues. I always liked that there are so many different options for people to talk to. To mention a few: the college nurse (who has a wonderful sense of humour and is not shocked by anything), the KCSU welfare officers (one male, one female), your Director of Studies (at one particularly horrific moment I burst into tears at mine, we had tea and a chat and I left the office feeling much better about myself and the world), any member of the Tutorial team, the Chaplain (whether you’re religious or not, he’s a lovely man).
What is there to do in your spare time?

In my first year, I mostly filled my spare time with music-related things. I auditioned for King’s Voices, just about managing to make a noise through all the nerves, and have been happily singing away in one of the most famous musical venues in Europe ever since, with a very nice and hugely varied group of people. I went on tour with them twice, once to Bologna and once to Malta. The choir I sang in at school did medleys from West End shows and pop covers, but King’s Voices introduced me to a whole different realm of vocal music which really helped with my academic work.

Through the choir I read lessons in Chapel, which works wonders for your public speaking, diction and confidence. I read a poem for the BBC programme ‘Carols from King’s’ this year, and was helping in the production van for the recording of ‘Easter at King’s’. Also, early on in first year I happened to get an email from someone looking for a page-turner, so I became a regular at the Kettle’s Yard evening concerts as well as the more prestigious Concerts at King’s.

My main extra-curricular musical activity has been King’s College Music Society. I started doing odd-jobs in my first year, making posters, tickets and so on. In my second year I became Student President and was in charge of my own committee, organising large- and small-scale concerts in College. The aim was to get more people involved in making music, so on top of the big concerts that were expected of us, we started up a recital series as well as a Friday night slot which showcased some of the amazing bands that King’s has floating around. I’d never done anything like it before and found myself making things up as I went along, as there wasn’t anyone who’d done it before still around to help. This year I took more of a back seat as Secretary and guided a new President through the year.

I can now look back and be really proud of what we achieved. Our May Week Concert, where students sang, played and conducted some pretty adventurous works, was one of the most successful the college has seen in a long time.

Having avoided sport rather successfully for 19 years, in second year one of my best friends became women’s captain of King’s College Boat Club, and talked me into trying it out. I’m not sure how I got sucked in, but I’ve now rowed in the first VIII for five terms, competed in four sets of “Bumps” (crazy week of racing), and met some really amazing people.

I think I liked the instant reward you get with rowing: with academic work you have to wait until exam results come out to see where your hard work got you, whereas the progress you make when you’re doing something new and being constantly tested (both by others and yourself) is very obvious and very satisfying.

It was great for getting me out of bed in the morning, especially this year when I didn’t really have lectures to get to, and while I was revising it was great for getting some headspace back, out in the open air and (hopefully!) the sun.
The social side of the boat club is pretty spectacular too, and now that my leaving Cambridge is getting scarily close, I think this is one of the main things I’ll miss.

**What comes after Cambridge?**

Going out into the world after being in education for so long is strange. We’re all well aware that the graduate job market isn’t in great shape, and more than ever the arts are struggling to keep going with funding cuts and the public tightening their belts. All the same, I’m confident that a music degree was the right thing to do. In a slightly strange series of events, last Easter I met a gentleman on the rowing machines in the gym, who found out that I was a music student and offered me a job. I’m now Front of House Manager for the summer theatre that he runs at a stately home in Cheshire, and am heading back for my second season there after graduation.

I’m confident that a music degree was the right thing to do.

My time at King’s has given me the contacts, experience, confidence and inspiration to really go for it.

In September I plan to begin a gap year of sorts; I have an au pair position in France lined up, where as well as taking a break from academia and improving my French, I hope to keep up the singing and rowing. Long-term I would like to work in the concert and theatre world, putting on productions, shows and music. My time at King’s has given me the contacts, experience, confidence and inspiration to really go for it.

Student perspectives: [http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/student-perspectives.html](http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/student-perspectives.html)

Study at King’s: [http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/index.html](http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/index.html)

King’s Admissions Office: undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk