

King's Student Perspectives

English

Arran, 2nd year

I've just finished my second year studying English at King's College, Cambridge and have had an amazing time so far.

When I first received my offer from Cambridge, I was unsure whether it would be right for me and was worried about fitting in. It can take a while to settle in, but King's is now a home-away-from-home and I soon realised that lots of the other freshers (first-years) were thinking the same thing. Everyone is so friendly that you can soon find your place. Some people may have backgrounds that make them more familiar with the

Cambridge environment. Yet, in my experience, no one cares what school you went to or your grades. I can't believe that I've only got one year to go and am quite jealous of people applying!

Why Cambridge?

In my final year at school in Sheffield, I did A levels in English Literature, Biology and Chemistry. I also studied Maths and Critical Thinking for AS level in Year 12 (the penultimate school year in the UK), and I then wrote an Extended Project on American Literature over the summer. It was half-way through Year 12 that I decided to apply for English Literature at university, as it was the only subject that I could see myself spending three years on. Although many students who do the English course have done more essay subjects at school, having mostly science A-levels wasn't a problem for me, since everyone comes to Cambridge with different interests and preferences and are then introduced to a wide range of material and approaches.

As I was still unsure about where my interests lay within English Literature and I hadn't read many pre-1800 texts, I wanted a course

that covered lots of material but was still flexible. Cambridge offers this. The papers in the first two years range from 1300 to the present day, and within those periods you can often choose authors, texts and essay questions. This gave me the structure and freedom to discover new interests and then pursue them further. It turns out that I really enjoyed the medieval literature paper, for example. Chaucer is surprisingly funny and I might never have read some medieval authors if it wasn't for the wide range of the Cambridge English degree.

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The beginning of 2nd year and about to welcome the new first years – Arran is second from left.



Snowball fight in Chetwynd Court

I applied to King's because of its beautiful buildings and central location on the river, which means that most things, like libraries, shops and lectures, are only a 10 minute walk away. I didn't know this before arriving, but King's has a reputation of being less traditional, so you don't have to wear gowns at formal meals, for example. I find that King's has a refreshing mix: you have the grand Cambridge atmosphere but isn't overly

institutional. For example, there may be formal meals but they're fun (though surreal!) and I've been pleasantly surprised to not experience any of the snobbery that can be associated with Cambridge at King's or at other colleges.

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The college system means that you meet people doing loads of different subjects, which is often really interesting, and a nice way of taking a break from your course. You soon get to know lots of people in your year and mix with other undergraduates, even graduates as well, and often see them around in central spaces in College, like the coffee shop, cafeteria, bar and

library. These are great, communal places to meet people, relax and work.

Starting the course

After the initial rush of freshers' week, you settle into work pretty quickly. The first few essays are generally a panic for everyone, as the switch from three or more subjects at A-level to one at university, and having less guidance, compared to school, is daunting at first, but you soon find your rhythm and way of doing things. Also, being immersed in the course and having the freedom to carry out more of my own research, has helped me to learn loads about many different kinds of literature and how to approach texts.

The important thing is that the course works for you. Within major topics you have lots of choice – you can even set your own weekly questions! For my first two years, the modules I could pick between were whether to do an English language or a foreign language paper. I started Italian from scratch and have really enjoyed learning

You can even set your own weekly questions!



Inside King's bar

another language and finding out more about Italy's literary culture – I even got to go to Sienna to learn Italian for a month by getting a place on the King's exchange! On the exchange I stayed in university accommodation and had the weekends and afternoons free to relax and travel around Tuscany. Lots of opportunities (there's another King's exchange to Heidelberg in Germany for one), are advertised via the university email service each week and I just had to write a short application about my interest in Italy to be accepted.



Arran (left) in Sienna

In third year there is more choice over the papers you study, so you can continue with the interests you've developed in the first two years (which give you a general overview of English Literature from the British Isles), or research entirely new areas of literature. I've picked the postcolonial paper for next year, because post-colonialism has been one of my interests since first year, when I read some postcolonial criticism on Aphra Behn's Oroonoko for the Renaissance paper. I want to take the opportunity, in third year, to read postcolonial texts by authors who aren't English or American, and I've found the postcolonial theory I've come across so far really interesting. For me, postcolonial theory is more engaged with the world than some literary theories; colonial attitudes and policies are, in part, informed by the racial and national stereotypes created through literary, and other, texts.

The teaching: supervisions, classes and lectures

English at Cambridge is mostly taught through essays and supervisions, which are one-to-one or one-to-two discussions with a supervisor (an expert in your topic). I'd not been taught in this way before but it's a great way to become more confident in your ideas and

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arguments. Really interesting topics can come up which make you think about literature in entirely new ways, even if these may be only slightly related to the original subject of your essay. Debating with people who may be your lecturers or may have written books on the authors you're studying can be a bit scary, but it's amazing for stretching and developing your ideas. Since this is quite a personal way of being taught, supervisors are generally understanding if you're working hard but you've not been able to do a particular essay or meet a deadline, as they know you and are often happy to

just talk about your initial thoughts if you've struggled to do an essay that week.

As well as supervisions, there are classes with the other people in your year studying English at King's. These are useful for background on a subject, and having group discussions helps with thinking about other perspectives and getting to know other people doing your course.

The final way that you're taught here is lectures, which, like classes, are frequently a condensed overview that helps you to connect topics and the period you're studying together. In fact, lectures are optional so you only have to go to the ones that particularly interest you, and can even attend the lectures of other subjects - although unfortunately I haven't gotten round to that yet! Preparatory lectures to a term are often the ones I've found most useful, as they gave me a feel for the period I'm studying before I get immersed in individual texts and authors. A lecture on Structuralism, for the Literary Theory paper, was also very interesting since in just fifty minutes I was introduced to a major concept in thinking about how language creates meaning.

Essays

The weekly essay for Cambridge can seem the most intimidating part of the Cambridge course. You may get a lot longer to write coursework at A-level, but I learned pretty quickly that the approach to essays at Cambridge is different: supervisors are interested in your ideas and don't expect a polished, perfect essay since you've only had a week to write it and do the reading.

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My essay style has changed quite a bit from trying to describe and cover the whole text to focusing in on a particular theme or perspective which interests me. The flexible essay system at Cambridge means that I can write about what engages me, and the feedback from supervisions has helped to develop my style from week to week. I now write with more of an argument, rather than writing descriptively, which has happened naturally as I've become more confident in writing, but also from responding to my supervisors' comments on each piece of work.

There are loads of nice spaces for working in Cambridge. Last term was pretty sunny, so often I went out to the Fellow's Garden, next to my accommodation, or sat on the Backs (the grass by the river). The library in College, faculty libraries or the University Library are good places to work as well if you particularly feel like getting down to some reading, and there are so many books and online resources that you're never short of material. Everything is fairly close - lectures and faculty libraries are all on the Sidgwick Site which is only five



The Gibbs Building, in the middle of College



A room in the Gibbs Building, where English classes take place.

minutes away from King's, so you can easily hop from place to place if you want to avoid, or seek out, being distracted by friends!

Outside work

When you're not working, there are plenty of societies and activities to get involved in, or you can just chill out with friends as well. My accommodation in Garden Hostel has a common room with a TV and sofas, and I've been getting better at cooking this year.

The societies are pretty informal so you could get quite involved with their organization and put on events or just go once or twice a term to try different things and meet people outside of College. I go climbing with the King's mountaineering society, we can play on basketball and football courts near King's, and I've been attending an Italian film course at the Cambridge Language Centre to

keep up my Italian outside of my course. There's a big theatre scene in Cambridge and several student newspapers, for activities more related to the English course.

There's a big theatre scene in Cambridge.

the opportunity to do so. Since I've been at King's, the drama society has been relaunched, and other King's students and I started a university-wide UNICEF society this year, to fundraise and advocate for UNICEF. So far, the society has organized events around college to further this aim and has reached out to other colleges by recruiting college reps.

There are also the college and university student unions. For the King's Student Union (KCSU), my friend and I are the Access Officers. This role involves encouraging students from less privileged backgrounds to apply to Cambridge. I've helped with



Arran (left) with friends in the common room in his Garden Hostel accommodation

In College, King's bar and coffee shop are good social spaces as it's rare to go in and not see someone you know. If you want to set up a college or university society and generally get more involved in college life, there is definitely



Arran ran the student helpdesk in King's bar this year to welcome and help King's interview candidates



Green Giant!

events in college, and there is an “Access Bus” visit in the Easter holiday to Middlesbrough schools to talk to Year 10 students about university life.

King’s also has a big party, organized by students, at the end of each term and it’s great to see most of your year group in the college at them.

The important thing is to get the balance right between work, seeing friends and being involved in any activities or societies that may interest you. You can make Cambridge work for you, and there’s loads to try and do, but I’ve found that it’s important to also take some time to relax and remember that it’s not the end of the world if you miss a

weekly deadline or don’t go to everything that’s on. Also, the holidays at Cambridge are pretty long, so there’s time then to switch off and do other things – there is some work to do over the holidays, but not too much. As the holidays are so long, the work keeps you in touch with academic things, which makes the switch back to term-time easier.

Applying

Several factors come into play when you apply to Cambridge, so don’t worry too much if one thing seems to go badly – always remember that they look at the whole of your application. The application process also can vary a little from year to year and from college to college so check carefully on the college website to make sure that you know what’s involved.

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For me, the interview day at King’s consisted of an interview, a group discussion and a written test. It’s very hard to tell how things went. I thought that my interview day went terribly, so it’s safest to not make assumptions and just wait for a response. In my interview, I was asked about what I’d read recently. Before the interview maybe think back over what you’ve read in the past couple of months and if anything in particular interested you. It could be helpful to read genres or periods that you know little about so that your literary range is greater, or to read in depth about a particular author or

movement that you find engaging – be comfortable in what you’re talking about. For the group discussion, you are given some of the texts in advance so you have the opportunity to prepare more specifically, and the written test is quite broad so is hard to do anything for in advance.

When applying, it's good to remember that everyone is probably going to be nervous and not have read all of English Literature! My advice is to concentrate on your own application: think about what you've read and what you enjoy reading, and prepare what you can if you've been given any preparatory materials. Also, if you don't understand a word or concept that an interviewer is using then ask. The interviewers aren't there to intimidate you and they don't expect you to know everything already as

they want you to learn things at university!

It could be helpful to read genres or periods that you know little about so that your literary range is greater, or to read in depth about a particular author or movement that you find engaging.



A common room in another accommodation hostel

A note to current King's English students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying English at King's for our prospective students to read, please email Kristy in the Admissions Office for further details:

undergraduate.admissions@kings.cam.ac.uk