

King's Student Perspectives English

Bryony, 1st year
August 2011

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.

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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.



Fellows' Garden (open to all students)



← King's Library The river bank

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.

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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

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*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.

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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!

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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

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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. ([Update – August 2013](#): Please note that Paper 7 no longer exists in this form. But subject to certain restrictions, it is possible for some appropriately qualified students to

replace one of their period papers with a language paper borrowed from another Faculty or Department. There are options, for instance, to study Old English or Old Norse from scratch, or for selected students to take a paper in Classical Greek or Latin or one of a wide range of modern languages.)

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

I've 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.

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



The English Faculty, seen from King's Old Garden Hostel

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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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.