

King's Student Perspectives

MML: French and Spanish

Tom, 2nd year

What attracted you to the Cambridge languages 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. I then found myself particularly attracted to the university because of my interest in languages. Having long enjoyed studying foreign languages, and in particular their literature, my attention was drawn by the traditional focus of the Cambridge course: whilst studying languages at Cambridge 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 also keen to keep up both my French and my Spanish. Whilst other universities allow you to study two languages, the Cambridge course is built around this. Furthermore, the unique second “M” in the course title held special intrigue for me (the course is called MML, which stands for Modern and Medieval Languages): 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 at Cambridge.

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How do the first two years of MML work?

The two languages that you study on the MML course can either be one ab initio (i.e. from scratch) and one post A-level, or both post A-level (this is the option I chose). Doing two post A-level languages means that in the first year you study approximately half language (translation, oral and use of language) and half literature/linguistics. There isn't that 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.

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Once you're in second year, the selection of papers that you can study widens vastly. You 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 linguistics, the choices are numerous though - 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. 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?

You're taught through a variety of supervisions, classes and lectures, although you will have to go through most of the material in your own time, given that much of the content of what you do is actually reading books. Language teaching mainly happens through classes of around fourteen people at the faculty, teaching you how to translate and also the finer points of French, Spanish or whatever other grammar. Translation classes give you a passage every fortnight to translate and hand in, whilst "Use of..." classes 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 also have oral supervisions where you discuss a topic with a native speaker of your chosen languages, preparing you for the 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.

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Are there many lectures?

Lectures are sparser for MML than for many other subjects at Cambridge. Language is hardly lectured on at all, being mainly taught through classes, but there are grammar lectures in some terms in your first year. The main body of your lectures is 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 are studying, so although they are certainly 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 then blend 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 and enjoy the lectures but don't be enslaved by them.

And supervisions?

Supervisions for scheduled papers involve you writing an essay on a text or topic that your supervisor sets, and then discussing the essay and wider issues relating to the text in the supervision. Good supervisors 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 argues against it -

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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. 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 that 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 do their best to help you.

Where do the different elements of your teaching take place?

The lectures take place on the Sidgwick Site (a collection of university faculties), as do the classes, whilst in first year your supervisions will probably be in King's. In second year you specialise more, so 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 whatever your interests are.



The MML Faculty on the Sidgwick Site, very close to King's

What is the teaching like at King's?

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In first year much of the teaching comes 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 you're in 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 Prof William Burgwinkle, one of the fellows at King's, is a specialist and expert in those fields, and an excellent supervisor.

I would very much look forward to my supervisions.

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 interviews and also a small written test on the same day.

The written test involves reading a passage, summarising it in the target language and then writing a brief essay on a related topic. For this, you just need to be able to think a bit creatively, as the chances of you knowing much about the topic are relatively small. My interview involved reading a short passage in my chosen language prior to the interview and then discussing it with the interviewer, as well as having a discussion of some grammar points. The interviews 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 the interviews - 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 with an academic in the interview environment, as that is something of a foretaste of your supervisions.

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If you want to have some control of what you discuss at interview, my advice is to put something interesting in your UCAS personal statement. Read a book and mention it. 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 make sure that you understand it very, very well!].

Basically, the interviewers want to test

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

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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. If you like sports, there are a number of societies and sports clubs to join. Rowing is a popular choice. I only rowed for my first two terms; whilst I found the experience of

actually being in the boat and rowing very enjoyable, be warned- it isn't for the faint-hearted. If you struggle to get up in the morning, imagine what it is like rising at 6am in the middle of winter when ice forms on your back whilst you row! Nevertheless, rowing is a great way to make friends and also I found that a morning outing sets you up nicely for a productive day of work and play to follow.

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.

If you're a musician, you will find yourself similarly well-catered for. There are numerous orchestras and choirs to join. I'm a singer, and at first I thought that because I was not 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 singing in King's Voices allows you to sing in the Chapel once a week, as well as going on some amazing tours (I have been on tour to Malta and France with King's Voices, both great occasions). Once again, in addition to the actual singing, the choir is a good place to make 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.

For me personally, 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 if you want to. I attend St Andrew the Great in the city centre, and have found a wonderful community there, where I have made lots of friends, and have been able to grow in my faith and knowledge of scripture. There is also 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.

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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, whilst keeping this in mind, I would like to make some broad brush strokes about the atmosphere and culture of King's.

King's is generally a pretty relaxed college. As a student here, you're given lots of support and academic stimulation (people here are enthusiastic and work hard) but you are also expected to be something of an adult

and to decide for yourself how much you are going to put into your degree and, thus, how much you will get out of it. King's also has a well-deserved reputation for being a College which throws some of the best parties, including our "Mingles" at the end of term, and the "King's Affair", which is 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 a notably political college, with lots of discussion in College on all kinds of subjects and many vocal and active students. The politics here 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 probably be prepared either not to mention it too much, or to have to defend arguments and hold your ground in discussion. I've actually 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 feel a little isolating very occasionally.

Nevertheless, I have friends of vastly differing opinions

to my own who I get on very well with, so politics 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 our surroundings at King's, not least the Chapel, which 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 here. King's is a wonderful place in which to study. Moreover, it is a wonderful place simply to live.

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A note to current King's MML students

If you would like to write about your experiences of studying MML 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

