

English Language and Literature Applicant Advice

Below is some advice from Cameron and Martha who are currently studying English at St Hugh's, we hope you find it helpful!

ELAT Test Advice

The ELAT is the test you will have to sit when applying to study English. You will be given six extracts, from which you pick two to compare under a given topic which is often very broad (mine was clothes) – this means you have room to be quite individual and creative with your ideas.

Make sure you have a clear and strong argument from the very beginning – make sure it is an essay not a commentary, have a direction.

The work you do for the ELAT is very similar to what you will have done for A-levels and GCSE. You should practise it once or twice, as you should any exam. Get used to selecting the texts, making sure to use the best technical detail and language you can and structuring the essay correctly.

As the essay is very similar to the sort you write for A-Level, I found it more helpful to practice how you respond to the six extracts more than how you write the essay. Give yourself about twenty minutes to read all the extracts, pick two and make a plan – make sure that you are familiar with the format of the exam.

If you are thinking about Oxford, you are more than capable of taking this test. You can reference ideas or other texts if it is relevant to your answer, but there is no requirement to do so. There's no hidden secret.

Written Work Advice

You will need to submit something previously written and marked at school in timed conditions. For this submitted work it is best to pick a range. Your favourite bit of coursework and your favourite exam essay that isn't reacting to an unseen text are probably the most common submissions. However, if two coursework essays are good and show different skills, such as close reading and comparison, this is also fine.

Don't panic over this, as this is probably the section that is the most difficult to judge. You can trust your teacher and pick the one they marked the highest. Most tutors are looking for potential, not perfection at A-Level! One practical note is to avoid submitting work that reacts to unseen texts. The interviewers already have the ELAT and are more interested in other skills that are more important at university, such as research, essay structuring and ideas.

Personal Statement Advice

When talking about works that have influenced you – try and show off your literary skills, give a very short analysis of the works you cite rather than just name-dropping. Read widely, be honest and don't try to claim untrue things. A good starting point is your favourite book from before 1920, your favourite poets, your favourite plays. What about them are worth studying at university? Write about works you are genuinely interested in, not just 'classics' that you think will score points.

If you mention a certain author make sure you have read multiple works by them, also I didn't do this but it's probably quite impressive if you've read some critical work on them.

Oxford cares mainly about the academic side but do include a little about other things to prove you are a rounded human. Don't just talk about your subject, mention other interests and experience, but at the same time make sure it's relevant and will lend well to an English degree e.g. if you are into journalism then mention it, but football is not necessarily relevant to an English degree (saying it's helped you develop the ability to work in a team is too tenuous a link). Show a bit of personality, they have to want to interview you and are going to spend a lot of time with you if you get in.

The way I did mine was to split it into three parts. About a fifth as an introduction at the top, about a fifth about extra-curriculars that didn't relate to English at the bottom (making sure to explain how these things would help with life in general). The middle section must be the longest, taking over half the statement. This was split again into two parts, one exploring my interests and personal research (making sure to explore multiple forms and give a range of examples, with reasons). With the other looking at events, visits or speeches and plays I had seen. This included more schoolwork and school-trips, whilst my first part showed more what I had studied outside of school.

It's fine on your personal statement to acknowledge when an area is weaker. For example, living in the countryside I saw few plays and had no real chance to see poetry readings and the like. I acknowledged this and said I was keen to do more. You don't have to do this if it would make you feel uncomfortable though.

Interview Advice

Similar as above – make sure anything you have mentioned in your personal statement is something you are interested in and well-versed in e.g. read other works by the author of a book you have cited that you can then bring up in the interview. I found it useful to be focused and attentive the entire time. This meant doing a little English A-Level work and bringing some books to read for pleasure. Before every interview I reread my personal statement just to make sure nothing would slip my mind in the interview.

Again, show your personality, don't be afraid to smile. Although there are many horror stories of Oxford's weird questions, these aren't something you can really practice as they are so unique – don't try to have a pre-worked formula for answering questions, the more open-minded you are the better. Also, don't worry if you haven't had interview practice like a lot of people will have – my school didn't provide it and I actually found it meant I went in with a clearer head and I answered questions the way I wanted to rather than the way I had been told you are meant to. If you would prefer, before the interview have a read of example interview questions and come up with answers. The internet has a lot and they do help. They give you practise at how to think through the questions, and stop the process from seeming entirely strange and unnatural. *So You Want to Go to Oxbridge?: Tell Me About a Banana* has some mock questions and sample ways to approach them. Your local library or school might already have some books or might order in some for you. But don't get caught up on specific books, there is no right way to answer their questions.

Don't worry if a question is unexpected, or if you stumble over it. Just focus on how you can answer, and don't be afraid to openly show your thought processes as to how you got to your answer. A large part of the interview is attempting to see how far you can push ideas and reshape what's been said to create something new, not just giving a pre-written essay. The interviewers are looking to see how

you react to difficult questions not because they want to catch you out or seem cleverer than you, but because they are modelling how the course works.

Most interviewers give you time to prepare in a separate room with a text or some questions, so you might have about twenty minutes to analyse an extract of some sort that you will then discuss for part of the interview. Write down every thought you have, and rather than trying to form wider points, stay close to the text, they are interested in your close analysis as well as theoretical points (these are good too but don't let them overpower close reading). Make sure to read carefully, paying attention to any details you are interested in.

Try to include some technical language or detail, but make sure you understand it. This is very important. Again, if you are at interview you've already shown an aptitude, and you don't need to suddenly become a genius overnight.

Keep calm. That might sound difficult, but it's important to breathe and keep calm. It's easier if asked an unexpected or difficult question to slowly speak it through instead of rushing something and giving an answer you don't agree with or think makes sense. Ian McKellan (who studied English at Cambridge) has a slow, deliberate interview style that is worth watching to see someone practising this calm manner of answering in every interview he has ever done.

Good Luck!