



How to apply

Interviews

Why do we interview?

Most of our applicants look very strong on paper. They have done well at GCSE and AS level (or in other examination systems) and have glowing references from their teachers. Interviews give us the chance to get to know our applicants individually and to distinguish between them. They are your chance to demonstrate your knowledge of your subject and your capacity for self-motivation and independent thought.

However, it is important to remember that interviews are only one selection tool. When we assess an application, we look at everything: previous exam performance, predicted grades, personal statement, reference, written work, tests, and any special circumstances (e.g. problems with teaching or health, etc.) So it is important to keep the interviews in perspective.

We invite the vast majority of our applicants to interviews, either in Cambridge or elsewhere (see below); however, if we feel that an applicant would have little chance of success on the basis of their application, even with an excellent interview performance, we reserve the right not to call them.

How do we do it?

UK/EU applicants will be invited to interview at Newnham College. Some international applicants may apply for interview in their own country (Canada, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore) or may choose to come to Cambridge. We may sometimes, but not always, arrange written tests and/or Skype interviews for students from outside the EU who are unable to travel to Cambridge.

Most of our interviews take place in early December. We may exceptionally be able to schedule early interviews for applicants on gap years who will no longer be in the country by December. All your interviews (and [written assessment](#), if this applies in your subject) will usually be on one day, but you are welcome to free overnight accommodation at Newnham if that helps with your travel arrangements. On interview days, we have lots of student volunteers who will welcome you and show you to your interview rooms. These student helpers are also always happy to give College tours (time permitting) and to answer any questions about Newnham.

Interviews vary slightly from subject to subject. Most interviews last between 20 and 30 minutes. You will normally have at least two interviews. Everyone will have at least one subject interview with one or two experts in their field. This is usually the Director of Studies and/or other specialist academics. In some subjects there may also be a general interview with the Admissions Tutor who will ask serious questions about your subject, but

these may be a little less technical than the ones you have to deal with in your subject interview.

When we receive your application we will write to you with more detailed information about the interview procedure in your subject. In some subjects we need examples of your written work (we may use them as a basis for discussion in your interviews). In other subjects, we will ask you to read a short passage, or work on a set of problems before your interview starts.

What questions do we ask?

We do not ask trick questions. We see interviews as model teaching sessions, and your interviewers will be keen to help you do your best, so do not worry about being caught out. There are some awful myths around about Cambridge interviews, but they are just that: myths. All our interviewers are trained in delivering fair and structured interviews.

Our questions will be challenging, and we will not pretend otherwise. Often there will be no easy answers. However, the problems we invite you to attempt will not be impossible. They will be designed to make you think on your feet, to consider new material and to put forward solutions step by step, sometimes with the help of your interviewers.

Your interviewers do not expect a perfectly polished performance – it is fine to stop and think and to change your mind. We know that you will be nervous and we will be able to take this into account. What we are interested in is your potential to learn – you as an individual – and so we want you to express your own ideas and to think for yourself.

What are we looking for?

The Senior Members at Newnham are very passionate about their subjects. We would like to see a similar passion and enthusiasm in you, but we obviously do not expect you to have the same level of subject knowledge. We are very interested in how you think. We would like you to be critical, independent, analytical and flexible. This means that we assess how you apply your existing knowledge to new situations and how quickly you pick up new ideas. We would like you to be committed to your studies; the Cambridge course has to be right for you. We also look for motivation and organisation. Teaching terms at Cambridge are only ever eight weeks long, so students have to be able to manage their time. Finally, applicants for vocational courses such as Medicine or Veterinary Medicine have to be especially dedicated to their future profession.

“Do”s and “Don’t”s

Here are some useful tips regarding what you should and should not do when it comes to your interview:

- Do leave plenty of time to get here, or take us up on our offer of free accommodation.
- Don’t worry about what to wear (but Cambridge in December can be cold).
- Do remind yourself why you want to study your subject.
- Do re-read the personal statement and any work you sent in.
- Do read around, and especially more deeply into, your subject. Don’t just stick to your A-level syllabus. Department websites often have recommendations. The Admissions Office or your teachers may also be able to give advice.
- Do keep up with current issues in subjects where this is relevant, such as Law, Economics, Medicine or HSPS. But don’t feel you need to read three newspapers a day. Read what interests you.
- Do get used to talking clearly and intelligently about your subject. Talk to your teachers, your family and friends.
- Don’t learn any speeches or answers by heart. You won’t be able to predict the questions. It is better to be spontaneous and to listen carefully to the questions.
- Don’t be intimidated by your interviewers. They want you to succeed.
- Don’t (mis) interpret any “signals”, e.g. your interviewer looking at the clock. They are not bored – they just need to make sure that they stick to the timetable and are fair to everyone.
- Don’t give up. If you find that a question is difficult, try to give it a go anyway, based on what you know.
- Do think aloud (within reason!). Your interviewers like to hear you working your way towards an answer, because then they can see how you think. They may then also be able to help.
- Do take control. Tell us about your interests in your subject. Usually there is time in the interview for you to let us know about something you particularly care about.
- Do find out more about us. There is usually time for questions at the end of an interview. If you have done your research about the course and the college and do not have any questions, that’s fine.
- Do remember that interviews are a useful experience. You will have many more of them in the course of your career.

Resources

The Cambridge University website has many useful [resources](#) relating to interviews, including videos on [Preparing for Interview](#) and [The Interview](#) (some parts of these were filmed at Newnham!).