

WHTC University application subject guides

English

This guide has been written to help support you in your application to university. It contains the following information relevant to your subject to help you decide where to apply and put together the best application that you possibly can:

1. **Course links**
2. **Entrance requirements**
3. **Recommended A-levels**
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1. Course links

Below are links to the top courses for this subject in the UK (according to [The Complete University Guide](#)). Click on the links to find information about what the course is like, what you'll learn, and loads of information about things such as fees and accommodation. However, remember that there are loads of other great universities out there, so check out The Complete University Guide or just google studying your subject at university.

1. [University of Cambridge](#)
2. [Oxford University](#)

3. [Durham University](#)
 4. [University of Saint Andrews](#)
 5. [Manchester University](#)
 6. [University of Liverpool](#)
 7. [Cardiff University](#)
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2. Entrance requirements

Here are the grades that the university suggests you need to get in to that course, and the likely offer that they will give you. If you're worried that your predicted grades aren't this high, don't worry – these are the universities with the highest requirements. There are plenty of other great universities out there with lower entrance requirements!

1. **Cambridge:** A*AA (English Literature at A-Level is required)
 2. **Oxford:** AAA (candidates are expected to have English Literature or English Language and Literature to A-Level),
 3. **Durham University:** A*AA
 4. **St. Andrews:** AAA-ABB (an A in English or English Literature)
 5. **Manchester:** AAA-AAB (AAB, including English Literature, or English Language & Literature (i.e. not English Language alone)
 6. **Liverpool:** ABB (an A in Language, Literature or Language and Literature)
 7. **Cardiff:** ABB-BBB (achieve a B in English Literature or English Literature and Language or Creative Writing. Do note that General Studies and Critical Thinking will not be accepted.)
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3. Recommended A-levels

Different universities may differ as to what A-levels they ask you for. Some might list one subject as 'essential', while another might list the same subject as just 'helpful', so make sure to check out the course page (under Section 1 of this document, or on the university website) to be sure what your chosen university expects!

English Literature: Most courses require you to have English Literature.

English Language: Some courses require English Language studies, although some don't so do check carefully!

History: Studying History can be helpful to pupils in completing the course (Oxford), however it is definitely not required.

4. Admissions tests

What admissions tests are you typically required to sit in addition to submitting your application? This also differs from uni to uni, so if your chosen university isn't on this list, make sure you check out the course page so you know exactly what you need to apply.

Cambridge: pre-interview written assessment in English

Oxford: ELAT

Durham: None

St. Andrews: None

Manchester: None

Liverpool: None

University of Cardiff: None

5. Recommended reading

Reading some relevant books or articles is a really great way to demonstrate your passion for your chosen subject in your personal statement, and show how you've gone beyond the curriculum. Plus, if you really want to spend three years or more studying this subject at university, it should be enjoyable! Try taking notes and jotting down your thoughts as you're reading so that you can share some of this in your personal statement

• ***Studying English Literature: A Practical Guide* by Young:** This is very useful if you don't have much academic practice, which, coming from A-Level, you probably don't and that's okay! This is a great guide full of tips for essay writing, creating arguments and even sentence structure.

***The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages, Volume A:* by Greenblatt, et al. eds:** A trusted anthology for complete works, balanced selections and helpful editorial apparatus.

***Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* by Culler:** Culler offers insights into theories about the nature of language and meaning, human identity and the power of language.

Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory, 3rd edn by Barry: Beginning theory helps readers navigate through the thickets of literary and cultural theory, offering readers the best one-volume introduction to the field. The bewildering variety of approaches, theorists and technical language is lucidly and expertly unravelled.

Elaine Showalter, Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle (1992): Showalter highlights the emergence of the 'New Woman' and the presence of gender and sexual identities which begin to challenge the hegemonic structures that exist during the late-Victorian period, doing so with reference to canonical fin de siècle texts.

Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979): An important and highly influential feminist critique of a wide-range of Victorian literary texts.

Harold Bloom, The Western Canon (1994): In this highly controversial book, Bloom decides what literature is for, and what counts as 'good' literature, while simultaneously dismissing theoretical schools which, in his opinion, seek to over-politicise literature.

Stephen Fry, The Ode Less Travelled (2005): Fry covers metre, rhyme, many common and arcane poetic forms, and offers poetry exercises, contrasting modern and classic poets.

Prose

The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel by David: This book combines the literary study of the novel as a form with analysis of the material aspects of its readership and production and a series of thematic and contextual perspectives that examine Victorian fiction in the light of social and cultural concerns relevant both to the period itself and to the direction of current literary and cultural studies.

The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics by Cunningham: Professor of English Language and Literature at Oxford University, Cunningham provides a magnificent anthology presents the cornucopia of Victorian poetry within a single volume.

Poetry

Ovid's Metamorphoses: This is a narrative poem in fifteen books by the Roman poet Ovid, completed in 8 CE. It is an epic (or "mock-epic") poem describing the

creation and history of the world, incorporating many of the best known and loved stories from Greek mythology, although centring more on mortal characters than on heroes or the gods.

Homer's Odyssey (Robert Fitzgerald's Vintage Classics translation): It is the second of the two epic poems attributed to the ancient Greek poet Homer (the first being "The Iliad") and usually considered the second extant work of Western literature. It is widely recognised as one of the great stories of all time and has been a strong influence on later European, especially Renaissance, literature.

The Canterbury Tales by Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories in verse told by a fictional group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury Cathedral. As the original master of the unreliable narrator, Chaucer writes about the pilgrims' personalities as much as the stories they tell.

The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics, Fourth Edition by Green: This book has built an unrivalled reputation as the most comprehensive and authoritative reference for students, scholars, and poets on all aspects of its subject: history, movements, genres, prosody, rhetorical devices, critical terms and more.

The Poetry Toolkit: The Essential Guide to Studying Poetry, Second Edition by Williams: With examples from an extensive range of poets from Chaucer to today, *The Poetry Toolkit* offers simple and clear explanations of key terms, genres and concepts that enable readers to develop a richer, more sophisticated approach to reading, thinking and writing about poems.

Studying Plays

A Doll's House by Ibsen: This realistic drama highlights the cultural conflicts of the nineteenth century. Its shocking and controversial conclusion marks a monumental, historic shift in the role of theatre. Yet, Ibsen's masterpiece remains a celebration of the art of theatre. With its emphasis on individual characters, costumes, and personal props, Ibsen's play transforms common stage conventions into a prophetic vision of a new society, one where men and women, are free from the restraint of playing pre-determined roles.

The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies by Balme: Providing thorough coverage of the methods and tools required in studying historical and contemporary theatre, this Introduction examines the complexities of a rapidly changing and dynamic discipline. Following a cross-cultural perspective, the book surveys the ways theatre

and performance are studied by looking initially at key elements such as performers, spectators and space.

English Drama: A Cultural History by Shepherd and Womack: Shepherd and Womack show how the character of a given theatrical 'age', as traditionally described, is packed with contradictions and uneven in development. Focusing on key historical moments and modes, they offer chapters on Medieval Theatre, Renaissance Drama, Restoration Comedy, Melodrama, and Naturalism and conclude with accounts of Post-War British Theatre and the State and Drama in the Age of Television.

More suggestions from Oxford students [here](#)

6. Interesting MOOCs

Another great way of learning more about your chosen subject and demonstrating your interest is to take a MOOC, or Massive Open Online Course. These are free courses delivered by universities that you can take online. If the ones below don't take your fancy, try looking at [Class Central](#) - they have a huge list of different courses for every subject imaginable, and they're all free!

[Shakespeare's Life and Work](#) (Harvard University): Moving between the world in which Shakespeare lived and the present day, this course will introduce different kinds of literary analysis that you can use when reading Shakespeare. With short videos filmed on location in England and readings covering topics like Shakespeare's contemporaries and the politics of modern performance, you will learn a range of critical tool that you can use to unlock the meaning and relevance of Shakespeare's plays.

[Masterpieces of World Literature](#) (Harvard University): This literature course explores how great writers refract their world and how their works are transformed when they intervene in our global cultural landscape today. Focusing particularly on works of literature that take the experience of the wider world as their theme, this course will explore the varied artistic modes in which great writers have situated themselves in the world, helping us to understand the deep roots of today's intertwined global cultures.

[The Modern and the Postmodern, Part 1](#) (Wesleyan University): This course examines how the idea of "the modern" develops at the end of the 18th century in European philosophy and literature, and how being modern (or progressive, or hip) became one of the crucial criteria for understanding and evaluating cultural change. Are we still in modernity or have we moved beyond the modern to the postmodern?

[Robert Burns: Poems, Songs and Legacy](#) (University of Glasgow): Future Learn provides an opportunity for you to explore deeply the life and works of Robert Burns.

7. Useful additional resources

There are loads of other great things out there that you might want to look at to develop your interest and strengthen your application, from videos to podcasts, to websites. Here are a few suggestions:

The History of Literature: Author and literature expert, Jacke Wilson journeys through time in this podcast to examine history's greatest literary moments and

achievements, from dissecting the lives of our greatest authors to the writers, who went to war to the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Selected Shorts: One of the best storytelling podcasts around where actors read classic and new short fiction before a live audience.

British Library: The British Library offers a range of resources across topics including Romantics, Victorians, Restoration, Shakespeare, Renaissance and Medieval ([Click here](#))

Read Learn Live: The mission of this highly-engaging and informative podcast helps readers improve themselves through literature. In each episode, host Jon Menaster conducts an in-depth interview with a well-known author to understand their inspirations and motivations behind writing.

Gresham College: A collection of interesting lectures on a whole range of different topics.

National Poetry Competition: Prize for previously unpublished poems of up to 40 lines in length with a chance to win up to £5000. Candidates must be aged 17+.

Gould prize for essays in English literature: Essay prize for A-level students run by Cambridge University. 2020 deadline: 1st August. Submit an essay between 1,500 and 2,500 words on a topic to be chosen from the list of questions ([here](#)).

8. Related courses

At university, there are loads of different combinations of subjects that you can do. Maybe you might find one of these alternatives more interesting? A few ideas are listed

below with a sample link, but in most cases there are lots of universities that offer these different combinations so make sure to have a good look around!

You can combine English studies and also consider courses that have slightly different variations. You might be interested in courses that include the following:

Drama and English Literature (e.g. [Manchester University](#))

English and Creative Writing (e.g. [University of Birmingham](#))

English and Theatre Studies (e.g. [Warwick University](#))

Comparative Literature with Film Studies (e.g. [King's College London](#))

English Literature and Linguistics (e.g. [Queen Mary University of London](#))

English and Philosophy (e.g. [University of Leeds](#))

9. Oxbridge example interview questions

As you will know, applicants to Oxford and Cambridge have to take an interview in order to get a place. It is normal to get open-ended questions that are based on controversial literary ideas as well as short questions about your literary background.

You must anticipate for the interviewer to do the following:

- Interrogate you; you may find the interviewer's demeanour and style of questioning intense and off-putting, this is intentional and designed to make you think more on your feet as opposed to memorising the responses you have in your head!
- Provide **challenging and controversial** statements and **ongoing literary debates** surrounding the study of literature. These provocative statements are giving you an opportunity to confidently challenge and disagree. Do not be put off by these and use this time to demonstrate your ability to convey independent thought and confidence in what you personally believe.
- Interrogate **everything** mentioned in your personal statement.
- **Disagree with parts of your personal statement** - this is an invitation for debate and discussion. Do not be put off by this.
- Ask you to **expand on what you have mentioned** in your statement. If you have commented on a specific text, you must be prepared to go in to a deep discussion about it and what interested you about it. The more interest and depth of knowledge you demonstrate that **expresses your passion for texts outside of the curriculum**, the better.
- Give examples of **wider reading** you have completed/give examples of **seminal world literature** you have exposed yourself to out of interest □ you must be prepared to **expand on these and discuss** what you took away from this reading and how it has shaped your view on the world.
- Ask you to elaborate on broader interests and passions aside from literature.

Short Questions and Statements:

1. What have you read recently that has been published in the last 5 years and what did you think about it?
2. The BLM movement has invited a resurgence in discussion around the literary canonical debate, what are your thoughts on this matter?
3. Do you think the canon is still relevant?
4. What is literature?

5. What is the most rewarding thing you anticipate about the discipline of English?
6. What is most challenging thing you anticipate about the discipline of English?
7. What global literature have you read/exposed yourself to?
8. What text have you read that has had a profound effect on you as an individual?
9. My personal belief is that a text can exist without it's context, what are your thoughts on this matter? (encourage discussion about how people believe literature is a product of history and vice-versa)
10. There are intrinsic links between our identities and literature, discuss.
11. "To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text." – discuss.
12. The bible is not literature – discuss.
13. What books are bad for you?
14. When the reputation of the artist is tarnished, should we still celebrate their work? Can we achieve true separation of the art from the artist?

Open-ended questions, based on ongoing debates in literature:

The interview may explore some ongoing issues that are discussed amongst English scholars. It is important that you have a good understanding of some of these in order to facilitate a rich discussion and debate with the interviewers in order to show case your knowledge around literary theories and current affairs.

Some examples are listed below:

- The literary canon – link to ongoing educational discussions about the Eurocentric nature of English Literature courses/studies. Does the English curriculum reflect our modern world/ modern issues? Have you seen yourself or voices that mirror your own in what you have been taught in school?
- Censorship of literature: Is it something you agree/disagree with? Why? 'Censorship is an act of shielding against the total facts of our existence' – discuss
- 'The Death of the Author' – Barthes- does context enrich the literature or can art exist without it's context?
- Post-modernism – using the classics as a spring board. Does originality in literature exist? Does Literature improve over time? Do you think that plays should always have a beg/mid/end? Is the breakdown of more elitist literary conventions refreshing or damaging?
- Is literature a direct response to history? Or is history informed by literature?
- When the reputation of the artist is tarnished, should we still celebrate their work? Can we achieve true separation of the art from the artist?



JK Rowling has just published a book for adults after the hugely successful Harry Potter series. In what ways do you think that writing for children is different to writing for adults?

Candidates who have grown up on Harry Potter might have read Rowling's new book and have thought both about Rowling's change of audience and their own change as readers from child to adult. But even without knowing Rowling's work at all candidates could say something about themselves as readers, and how as readers they approach different kinds of books, and how writers develop a body of work and write for different audiences. Mainly I always want to know that whatever they are reading, candidates are reading thoughtfully and self-consciously, and are able to think as literary critics about all the books they read. I worry that not all candidates might have the same access to a wide range of literature, and I am careful to judge them on what they know, not on what they don't know. If I asked that question about Shakespeare some candidates might have a view of his literary output, but many wouldn't. If I start with Harry Potter, everyone at least has a starting point of recognition. And I think Rowling deserves a mention as I am sure that there are many people applying to study English at university this year who became avid readers because of her books.

Tell me about [a literary work you have mentioned in your UCAS personal statement].

I'd want to start with something the candidate has already identified as something they want to talk about (so be honest on your personal statement!). I'd want to get a sense of what the candidate picks out about it, and perhaps to try to move the discussion onto matters of form (*how* the text is written) rather than content (*what* it is about). That might include - how does the author choose to begin or end the work and why? is it a first-person or a third-person narrator, and what effect does that have? what kind of vocabulary and writing style are chosen? what assumptions does it make about its readers? There might be other questions too: does the biography of the author have any relevance to our interpretation? do we need to know something about the historical context to understand it differently? how would we evaluate whether it is 'good' or not, and does that matter? where might its meaning be ambiguous? can it be compared to one of the other texts mentioned or studied to clarify any one of these aspects? All of these approaches are intended to develop a discussion - like a tutorial - and to work with something the candidate is already familiar with - something they have read and/or studied and enjoyed - but to ask some more sideways or expansive questions about it, moving away from the character or close-



reading focus which is often prominent at A-level but is supplemented or challenged by other reading methods during university study.

Why do you think an English student might be interested in the fact that Coronation Street has been running for 50 years?

First and foremost this brings popular culture into the mix and also shows that techniques of literary analysis can be applied to other media. It could also open up discussion about things such as techniques of storytelling; mixing humorous and serious storylines/ characters; how a writer might keep viewers or readers engaged; collaborative writing; the use of serialisation, and how writers/texts might move from being perceived as 'popular' (like Dickens, say) to be 'canonical'.

An unseen text

Just before you begin your interview, you **could** be given two unseen poems and be asked to choose one, or you could just be given one poem, or none, or you could be given a prose extract instead. This may well be the way one particular college does it, but these things aren't standardised across colleges and the interviewers have the freedom to structure their interviews how they want, within reason. Similarly, some interviewers may just give you a text in the interview, without time beforehand to look it over.

How do I approach an unseen poem?

Do:

- Interrogate the poem – discuss what questions came to your mind as you read it.
- Have an open discussion about the images/language that you found particularly profound/striking and your reasons why.
- Show a passion and genuine interest in the poem.
- Demonstrate that you are able to think independently about the poem and have a strong opinion about what is being explored within it.
- Draw out messages that the poet may be attempting to convey – this should be informed by the language/form/structural choices used.
- Unpick the language/form/structure of the poem.
- Attempt, if possible, to draw on contextual hints/cues □ make comparisons to things you have read before perhaps to justify this suggestion.

Do not:

- 'I think the poem/ poet means...' – this exercise is designed to encourage your own independent and personalised response to a poem as part of an open discussion with the interviewer. The task is not to 'figure out' the poem.

