

WHTC University application subject guides

Modern Foreign Languages

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:

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1. Course links

Below are links to a number of highly rated 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 Oxford](#): Spanish (BA) (other related degree courses available)
2. [University College London](#): Spanish and Portuguese (BA) (other related degree courses available)

3. [University of Bristol](#): Spanish (BA) (other related degree courses available)
 4. [University of Warwick](#): Hispanic Studies (BA) (other related degree courses available)
 5. [University of Birmingham](#): Modern Languages (BA) (other related degree courses available)
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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.

1. **University of Oxford**: AAA (to include a modern language)
 2. **University College London**: AAB (Spanish required at grade A)
 3. **University of Bristol**: AAB (a modern language required at grade B)
 4. **University of Warwick**: ABB (to include a modern or classical language)
 5. **University of Birmingham**: ABB (the language(s) you wish to study at grade B)
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3. Recommended A-levels

Course requirements vary significantly depending on the course you wish to study and the university at which you wish to study. Unless you want to study a language ab initio (that is, from the beginning with little or no prior knowledge), you will be required to have studied your chosen language at A-Level. If you want to study a language ab initio, you will usually be required to have studied another language at A-Level to demonstrate your suitability and aptitude for the course. Some admissions tutors argue that having studied English Language or English Literature is advantageous for further study in a foreign language, especially if study of literature of the target-language country is a key

component of your chosen course. For this reason, we recommend also taking a look at these WHTC University application study guides.

4. Admissions tests

What admissions tests are you typically required to sit in addition to submitting your application? This also differs from university to university, 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.

1. **University of Oxford:** Applicants for language courses will need to take a test in the language(s) for which they have applied. This is known as the MLAT (Modern Languages Aptitude Test)
2. **University College London:** none
3. **University of Bristol:** none
4. **University of Warwick:** none
5. **University of Birmingham:** 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.

Spanish Grammar

***A New Reference Grammar of Modern Spanish* by John Butt and Carmen Benjamin:** This is likely to appear on most good university reading lists for those studying Spanish. It is a comprehensive and clear guide to Spanish grammar as it is written and spoken today in Spain and Latin-America. It

includes clear explanations of all grammar points relating to their usage and formation, and provides well-chosen, worked examples.

Hispanic Literature

***La casa de los espíritus* by Isabel Allende:** This novel narrates the life of the Trueba family, spanning four generations, and traces the post-colonial social and political upheavals of Chile.

***Nada* by Carmen Laforet:** This novel tells the story of a young girl who travels from the country to stay with her dysfunctional extended family in Barcelona shortly after the Spanish civil war.

***La casa de Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca:** This play about the lives of women in rural Spain explores the themes of sexual repression, inheritance and violence.

***El coronel no tiene quien le escriba* by Gabriel García Márquez:** This novel, set in a small Colombian town, focuses on the frustrated and stubborn Colonel, a veteran of the 'War of a Thousand Days', who is still awaiting his war pension after 30 years. His son has been murdered, family life is marred by constant sickness and poverty, exacerbated by the turbulent religious and political troubles in Latin America, yet both he and his wife demonstrate considerable resilience.

***La loca de la casa* by Rosa Montero:** This novel/essay/autobiography is an exciting and unexpected journey through the mystery of fantasies, of artistic creation and Montero's most secret memories.

Hispanic Culture

***Spain: A History* by Raymond Carr:** This book highlights the intellectual and social trends of each particular era in Spain's history, from Roman times to the present day.

***The New Spaniards* by John Hooper:** Since the restoration of democracy in Spain in 1977, traditional attitudes and contemporary preoccupations paradoxically exist side by side for many ordinary Spaniards. In this book, John

Hooper takes a close look at the issues affecting them in the twenty-first century.

***Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through a Country's Hidden Past* by Giles**

Tremlett: Horrified by the terrors of the Spanish Civil War, the rule of dictator Generalísimo Francisco Franco and intrigued by what Spaniards call 'the pact of forgetting', Tremlett has embarked on a journey around Spain and through Spanish history. His findings make for a fascinating book.

***A Penguin History of Latin America* by Edwin Williamson:** From the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of the New World to the present day, this book explores centuries of upheaval, revolution and modernisation within Latin America.

Portuguese Grammar

***Portuguese: An Essential Grammar* by Hutchinson, Lloyd et al.** This is likely to appear on most good university reading lists for those studying Portuguese. It is a comprehensive and clear guide to European Portuguese grammar as it is written and spoken by natives today. It includes clear explanations of all grammar points relating to their usage and formation, and provides well-chosen, worked examples.

Portuguese Literature

***A cidade e as serras* by Eça de Queirós:** In this satirical novel, the author reflects on his own experiences and compares the emptiness of upper-class life in Paris with the pleasures found in rural Portugal.

***A viagem do elefante* by José Saramago:** Based on real-life events, Saramago tells the story of Solomon the elephant's journey from Lisbon to Vienna in this enchanting mix of fact, fable and fantasy.

***Capitães da Areia* by Jorge Amado:** This novel tells the story of a large gang of street children who survive by begging, gambling and stealing in the streets of Salvador, Brazil.

Linguistics

***The Articulate Mammal: An introduction to Psycholinguistics* by Jean**

Aitchinson: *The Articulate Mammal* is a brilliant introduction to psycholinguistics. Aitchinson introduces and demystifies this complex and controversial subject, and explores the pioneering work of Noam Chomsky. She also considers new topics such as language and evolution, and the possibility of a 'language gene'.

***Limits of Language: Almost everything you didn't know about language and languages* by Mikael Parkvall:** As the title suggests, this book explores a range of obscure but fascinating questions. Some of these include: has there ever been a state with Esperanto as its official language? What is the least useful dictionary ever produced? What is the world's smallest language? Does English have more words than other languages? In which country are people the most polyglot? Can words consist of consonants alone?

***The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind* by Steven Pinker:** This book illuminates every facet of human language including its origin, its uniqueness to humanity, its acquisition by children, the workings of grammar, the production and perception of speech, language disorders and the ever-changing nature of languages and dialects.

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!

Hispanic Studies

[FluentU](#): This webpage offers a curated list of courses designed to improve your spoken and written Spanish, and to expand your knowledge of Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries.

[Coexistence in Medieval Spain: Jews, Christians, and Muslims](#): This course explores Jewish, Christian, and Muslim intercultural relations in Iberia from the Visigothic era until the creation of Queen Isabel I and King Ferdinand II's Catholic Spain.

Linguistics

[Miracles of Human Language: An Introduction to Linguistics](#): On this course, you will learn the basic concepts of linguistics unpick key terminology, get to know some of the key features of both widely-spoken and minority languages and get insight into what linguists do.

[An Introduction to Sociolinguistics: Accents, Attitudes and Identity](#): On this course, you will learn how sociolinguists explore the relationship between language and the expression of personal, social and cultural identity.

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:

Hispanic Studies

[El País Libros](#): An up-to-date and curated list of some of the best Spanish-language literature.

[BBC iplayer](#): If you don't know much about Latin America, head to BBC iplayer. Simon Reeve takes viewers on an exciting journey through a number of Latin American countries in his travel documentary series, exploring various facets of life. We recommend: '**Caribbean with Simon Reeve**', '**Colombia**

with Simon Reeve', 'Equator: Latin America', 'Tropic of Cancer: Mexico to the Bahamas' and 'Tropic of Capricorn: Chile to Brazil'.

Useful Podcasts: A fantastic way of acquiring a broader knowledge of key aspects of Spanish and Latin American culture (that is, their customs, traditions, festivals and gastronomy to name but a few, as well as what is happening in the Spanish-speaking world at present) is through podcasts. We recommend 'News in Slow Spanish', 'Spanish Obsessed' and 'Coffee Break Spanish'.

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

Multikultura: An excellent website for anyone looking to brush up their language skills and deepen their cultural knowledge.

BBC Mundo: BBC Mundo is the BBC's service for the Spanish-speaking world. The website offers news, information and analysis in text, audio and video.

Spanish press: A comprehensive list of news websites from across the Spanish-speaking world.

Portuguese Studies

Jornal Público: A free, online news site in Portuguese.

BBC Brasil: BBC Mundo is the BBC's service for the Portuguese-speaking world. The website offers news, information and analysis in text, audio and video.

Portuguese TV and radio: A variety of TV channels and radio stations broadcasting in European Portuguese.

Brazilian TV and radio: A variety of TV channels and radio stations broadcasting in Brazilian Portuguese.

Linguistics

The Language Log: A blog written by world renowned academic linguists but with a general readership in mind. There is an emphasis on humour, debunking language myths and other topical issues relating to language.

Linguistics Olympiad: The UK Linguistics Olympiad is a competition, like the Mathematical Olympiad, for school students, in which competitors have to solve complex linguistic data problems. Take a look at some of the past problems!

8. Related courses

At university, there are loads of different combinations of subjects that you can do. A few ideas are listed below with links to useful web pages, 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 Spanish with many other non-language subjects, including Law, Economics, or even Music or Drama. Check out the range of options at the [University of Bristol](#), [Kings College London](#) and [Queen Mary's London](#).

Another option is to study Spanish with a second language. Most universities offer a wide range of second languages to choose from, some of which are taught *ab initio* (that is, from the beginning with little or no prior knowledge).

Check out these options:

1. [University of Bath](#): Spanish with *ab initio* French, German, Italian, Mandarin or Russian.
2. [University of Southampton](#): Spanish with *ab initio* Portuguese.
3. [Kings College London](#): Spanish with *ab initio* French, German or Portuguese.
4. [University of Warwick](#): Hispanic Studies with a wide range of second languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese and Russian. Some of these are major:minor

honours, which means 75% of your teaching and learning time will be dedicated to one subject and 25% to the other.

Finally, as well as combining Spanish with other subjects, many universities also offer related degrees which have slightly different focuses. These include Latin American Studies ([University College London](#)), the study of Catalan (e.g. [University of Bristol](#)) or Hispanic Studies and Linguistics ([Queen Mary's London](#)).

Linguistics, that is, the scientific study of language and its structure, is often a popular choice for linguists as it incorporates aspects of language which are of inherent interest to them such as grammar, syntax and phonetics. It also addresses some more practical aspects of language such as how it is learned and the best way to learn or teach a language. By connecting the study of language to real-world problems and their solutions, Linguistics is seen as a highly valuable degree in preparing you for a whole host of careers. If you apply to study just one language at university (not combined with any other subject), you may be asked to take some modules in linguistics too.

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, or a poem or excerpt from a novel/short story/essay written in the target language to analyse. Here is a sample of the kind of questions you might get asked. Remember, you're supposed to not know the answer! They often deliberately choose topics that they think no one will have studied in order to make the questions fair.

What they're looking for is to see how you think under pressure, and how you can present your ideas and your logic. You should also be prepared to answer questions which delve deeply into the literature/film which you have mentioned in your personal statement.

Questions with discussion

Interviewer: Helen Swift, St Hilda's College, Oxford

Q: What makes a novel or play 'political'?

HELEN: This is the sort of question that could emerge from a student's personal statement, where, in speaking about their engagement with literature and culture of the language they want to study, they state a keen interest in works (of whatever type they mention, such as a novel, play or film) that are 'political'. We might start off by discussing the specific work that they cite (something that isn't included in their A-level syllabus), so they have chance to start off on something concrete and familiar, asking, for instance, 'in what ways?', 'why?', 'why might someone not enjoy it for the same reason?'. We'd then look to test the extent of their intellectual curiosity and capacities for critical engagement by broadening the questioning out to be more conceptually orientated and invite them to make comparisons between things that they've read/seen (in whatever language).

So, in posing the overall question 'what makes this political?' we'd want the candidate to start thinking about what one means in applying the label: what aspects of a work does it evoke? Is it a judgment about content or style? Could it be seen in and of itself a value judgment? How useful is it as a label? What if we said that all art is, in fact, political? What about cases where an author denies that their work is political, but critics assert that it is – is it purely a question of subjective interpretation? And so on. The interviewers would provide prompt questions to help guide the discussion. A strong candidate would show ready willingness and very good ability to engage and develop their ideas in conversation. It would be perfectly fine for someone to change their mind in the course of the discussion or come up with a thought that contradicted something they'd said before -- we want people to think flexibly

and be willing to consider different perspectives; ideally, they would recognise themselves that they were changing their viewpoint, and such awareness could indicate aptitude for sustained, careful reflection rather than a 'scattergun' effect of lots of different points that aren't developed or considered in a probing way. Undoubtedly, the candidate would need to take a moment to think in the middle of all that -- we expect that 'ermmm', 'ah', 'oh', 'well', etc. will feature in someone's responses!

Interviewer: Helen Swift, St Hilda's College, Oxford

Q: Should poetry be difficult to understand?

HELEN: This question arose out of discussion of a few poems that a candidate said he had read, and we were talking through how these poems were conveying meaning (through things such as tone and the imagery they used). We wanted to push the candidate into more conceptual thinking to test his intellectual curiosity and how he would handle moving from familiar particulars (the poems he knew) to less familiar ways of approaching them. What's important for candidates to realise is that we don't expect a single correct answer to such a question; it's a starting point for a new direction of discussion: what sorts of 'difficulties' might we have in mind? Are these specific to poetry or do they also feature in other types of writing? And so on.

What most interests us is that candidates are willing to venture down a new path, however uncertain this may feel: to have a go and show that they have the potential to develop their thinking further – and thus thrive on the sort of course we offer. Literature forms an important part of a Modern Languages degree at Oxford, but we know that most candidates won't have studied literature formally before in the language for which they're applying. What we want to know isn't that they've read a certain number of texts to prove their interest, but that they have the aptitude for studying texts: that they're able to think carefully and imaginatively about whatever they've had chance to read (poems, prose, drama) that's interested them, in any language.

Interviewer: Helen Swift, St Hilda's College, Oxford

Q: What is language?

HELEN: Although I would never launch this question at a candidate on its own, it might grow out of a discussion. Students sometimes say they like studying Spanish, for example, because they 'love the language'. In order to get a student thinking critically and analytically, the question would get them to consider what constitutes the language they enjoy – is it defined by particular features or by function (what it does)? How does form relate to meaning? And so on.

Interviewer: Helen Swift, St Hilda's College, Oxford

Q: What makes a short story different from a novel?

HELEN: To further their subject interest and to discover whether the Oxford Modern Languages course is a good fit for them, candidates are encouraged to try reading some literary texts in the foreign language. We know that most won't have studied literature formally before in the language for which they're applying, so this will be reading that they've undertaken independently. In that respect, short stories, such as those by Guy de Maupassant, are a good and a popular place to start: they're engaging, memorable and can feel quite approachable. So if a candidate mentions s/he has read a few short stories, we might begin by asking them which they found the most engaging (or, for instance, the most challenging) and why. After developing this discussion for a short while, we might then push outwards from particular narratives to broader, conceptual issues, such as 'what is a short story?' or, differently posed, 'what makes a short story different from a novel?'

This isn't a question on which we'd necessarily have expected the candidate to have reflected already; it would be the beginning of a conversation, which

would start by breaking down the question itself and building up an answer gradually: what might we want to think about in making such a comparison? What elements of plot design or structure or character presentation might differ? Are there, in fact, salient differences? Is it a valid opposition to make? We'd be looking for a willingness to try out new ways of thinking and an aptitude for thinking carefully and imaginatively through a perhaps initially unfamiliar issue. That we'd been speaking about one or two particular stories before posing this 'bigger picture' question would mean that the candidate would have ready to hand material to illustrate her/his responses. In asking such a question, I as interviewer don't have in my mind a fixed answer or set of expected points as the candidate starts to respond; the follow-up on any question depends on how s/he sets about thinking her/his way through it.

Interviewer: Stephen Goddard, St Catherine's College, Oxford

Q: In a world where English is a global language, why learn Spanish?

STEPHEN: I might use this question early in an interview in order to set the candidate thinking, and to elicit some idea of their motivation before moving on to more specific questions. Given the nature of the Modern Languages course, I would be interested in responses about the French language as a 'window' into French culture/literature/history, knowledge of which is valuable in itself/essential to understanding today's world, etc.; but would also be happy to see candidates investigate some of the assumptions underlying the question: Is English a global language? What about Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, etc.? Can we not in fact still consider French a global language? And so on.

Interviewer: Jane Hiddlestone, Exeter College, Oxford

Q: What do we lose if we only read a foreign work of literature in translation?

JANE: This is a good question as it helps us to see how candidates think about both languages and literature. They might be able to tell us about the

challenges of translation, about what sorts of things resist literal or straightforward translation from one language to another, and this would give us an indication of how aware they are of how languages work.

They might also tell us about literary language, and why literary texts in particular use language in ways that make translation problematic. This might lead to a discussion of what is distinct about literary works, and this helps us to see what kind of reader they are more broadly. We don't do this with the expectation that they have already read any particular works, however, but in order to get a sense of why they think it is worth studying literatures in foreign languages. This is an important issue, given that Modern Languages students at Oxford read a lot of literature in the language as part of their course. Occasionally candidates are able to give examples of famous lines or quotations that risk being misread when translated into English. This issue might also be something we discuss when we read an extract or poem in the language together during the interview.

Short questions

Hispanic/Portuguese Studies

- What Hispanic/Portuguese literature have you read?
- How has the literature you have read in Spanish/Portuguese informed your opinion of the period/society in which it was written?
- Do you think we ought to take literature as a sociological study of society, when you consider that most great authors are considered to have social difficulties?
- What do you think are the main differences between Spanish and Latin American society?
- What is the best way to learn a language, and why?
- Should we learn swear words in another language?

Linguistics

- What is the role of a translator?

- Is there any point studying languages with the invention of modern electronic translators?
- Can you only understand or analyse a text properly in its original language?
- Does language define our identity? What can you learn about a person from the way in which they speak?
- What makes something poetic?