



WHTC University application subject guides

Philosophy

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**
4. **Admissions tests**
5. **Recommended reading**
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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 Oxford (although Philosophy is not an option by itself, there are a number of combined degrees e.g. Philosophy and Maths)**



2. University of Cambridge
 3. University of St. Andrews
 4. London School of Economics
 5. UCL
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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. University of Oxford – A*A*A
 2. University of Cambridge A*AA
 3. University of St. Andrews – AAA
 4. London School of Economics – AAA
 5. UCL – AAA
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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!

In general any mixture of academic a-level subjects is accepted. Many philosophy courses have a logical basis so **maths** and **science** backgrounds are encouraged. However, Philosophy remains an essay based subject and therefore A-levels which



require long essays and written skills are advised also. These include, **RS, History, English Literature**

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: None

Oxford: None

St. Andrews: None

LSE: None

UCL: 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

General reading:

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction by E. Graig: an introduction to the field of philosophy, written in an accessible way

Philosophy: The Basics by N. Warburton: an interesting and compelling introduction to philosophy

The Philosophy Gym by Stephen Law: an introduction to philosophical questions and ideas that are relevant in modern society

Original works – an element of any Philosophy course will be the exploration of key texts by philosophers. Many of them can be quite challenging to read, but below are some of the more accessible texts.

- *Plato's 'Republic'*
- *Descartes' 'Meditations'*
- *Humes' Enquiry*
- *J.S. Mill 'On Liberty'*
- *Nietzsche's 'Beyond Good and Evil'*
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Philosophy of Religion

The Philosophy of Religion: A Critical Introduction by Clack, B. & Clack, B. A general introduction to the philosophy of religion

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion by Davies, B. A general introduction to the philosophy of religion

Pocket Dictionary of Apologetics and Philosophy of Religion by Evans, C. S. A general introduction to the philosophy of religion



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!

[Philosophy and the Sciences](#)

University of Edinburgh

Learn about the historical and philosophical foundations of contemporary science. What is the origin of our universe? What are dark matter and dark energy? What is our role in the universe as human agents capable of knowledge? What makes us intelligent cognitive agents seemingly endowed with consciousness?

[Philosophy and Critical Thinking \(edX\)](#)

University of Queensland

Thinking about thinking. What can we learn through philosophical inquiry that will help us to think with clarity, rigour and humour about things that matter? This course introduces principles of philosophical inquiry and critical thinking that will help us answer this question

[Ancient Philosophy: Aristotle and His Successors \(Coursera\)](#)

University of Pennsylvania

What is philosophy? How does it differ from science, religion, and other modes of human discourse? This course traces the origins of philosophy in the Western tradition in the thinkers of Ancient Greece. We begin with the Presocratic natural philosophers who were active in Ionia in the 6th century BCE and are also credited with being the first scientists

[Reason and Persuasion: Thinking Through Three Dialogues By Plato \(Coursera\)](#)

National University of Singapore

In this course we will study Plato's ancient art of blowing up your beliefs as you go, to make sure they're built to last. We spend six weeks studying three Platonic dialogues, then two more weeks pondering a pair of footnotes to Plato; that is, we will consider



some contemporary manifestations of issues Plato discusses. Our focus will be: moral theory and moral psychology.

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.

1000-word Philosophy

"...an ever-growing set of original 1000-word essays on philosophical topics."



A History of Ideas

Two minute animated videos explaining important ideas and concepts in the history of thought. From BBC.

Argument-checking political debates

Watch political debates that have been annotated with the details of each fallacious argument.

Crash Course: Philosophy on YouTube

Short, entertaining, enlightening videos about philosophy.

Oxford's Philosophy Talks

Over 500 podcast episodes from philosophers at (or visiting) Oxford.

Philosophy for Beginners

A "series of five introductory lectures, aimed at students new to philosophy" by Dr. Talbot at the University of Oxford.

Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

"...organizes scholars from around the world in philosophy and related disciplines to create and maintain an up-to-date reference work."

The Big Questions by TED-Ed

Learn about a philosophy puzzle in under 5 minutes with these YouTube videos made by TED and scholars from all over the world.

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 Philosophy with almost any other subject. Here are some of the most common combinations:

- Philosophy, Politics and Economics
- Philosophy and Maths



- Philosophy, Religion and Ethics
- Philosophy and a language (e.g. French/Spanish)
- Philosophy and Classical Studies

9. Oxbridge example interview questions

Why do you believe what your teachers tell you?

What makes you think I'm having thoughts?

What does it mean to be happy?

If you're not in California, how do you know it exists?

Do you believe in free will? How far does it extend to – an oyster, for example?

If you entered a teletransporter and your body was destroyed and instantly recreated on mars in exactly the same way with all your memories intact etc, would you be the same person?

Is being hungry the same thing as wanting to eat?

Are you your body?

If you were to form a government of philosophers what selection process would you use?

Is it moral to hook up a psychopath (whose only pleasure is killing) to a reality-simulating machine so that he can believe he is in the real world and kill as much as he likes?

Would a blind scientist who knew every scientific thing about colour actually know colour?

What is an emotion?

How can you prove that anything exists outside your own mind?

$2 + 2 = 4$. Why is this true?

Four Hat Problem: [https://www.mycoted.com/Four Men in Hats](https://www.mycoted.com/Four_Men_in_Hats)

What does it mean to be healthy?

'I agree that air transport contributes to harmful climate change. But whether or not I make a given plane journey, the plane will fly anyway. So there is no moral reason for me not to travel by plane.' Is this a convincing argument?

The interview is not meant to test candidates' knowledge of Philosophy, since more often than not, they have not studied this subject before. Moreover, we are not trying to get them to guess or arrive at 'the right answer'. Rather, the interview is



about candidates' ability to think critically, to deal with counter-examples to the views they put forward, and to draw distinctions between important concepts.

This answer raises the difficult question of individuals' responsibility, as individuals, for harmful collective actions. Some candidates might be inclined to dispute the premise that air transport contributes to climate change: that's fine, but we would then ask them to accept that premise for the sake of argument. Whether they are able to do that is in itself an important test, since much of philosophical thinking proceeds in this way.

Some candidates might say that the argument is a good one: given that what I do makes no difference, I have no moral reason not to do it. At this point, I would want to know what they consider a moral reason to be (as distinct from or similar to, for example, a practical or prudential reason).

I would also push them to think about other cases: for example, the bombing of Dresden (one jet fighter less makes no difference to the collective outcome – so why not go and fight); or voting (why should I vote in a general election, given that my vote makes no difference)? Are the cases the same? Are they different? If so, are the differences or similarities relevant? That is to say, do those differences and similarities help us think about the original case? Do they help us to work out a view about individual responsibility in those cases? For example, in the Dresden case, the individual jet fighters act together as part of an organisation – the air force – whose aim is to bomb Dresden. But we cannot say of companies such as British Airways that they aim to cause climate change. And the air passengers cannot really be described as acting together. Does this make a difference?

Suppose that you could plug yourself into a machine for the rest of your life, which would give you all the experiences you find enjoyable and valuable. Once in the machine, you would not know that you are plugged in, and that these experiences are not real. Would you go into the machine? If so, why? If not, why not?

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with unlimited supplies of pleasures-inducing drugs. We would also invite them to consider the distinction between ‘experiencing’ and ‘doing/acting’: could actually carrying out those pleasurable activities be a better measure of a good life than merely experiencing those pleasures? Other candidates might say, on the contrary, that they would not go into the machine, precisely on the grounds that a good life is not merely one in which we experience pleasure. Depending on how they construct their argument, we would try and see what they make of the distinction between what is pleasurable and what is valuable (some experiences might be valuable precisely in so far as they are not enjoyable.) In all cases we want them to reflect on whether a good life, for me, is simply what I say it is, or whether a good life must be objectively good.

Interviewer: Tim Mawson, St Peter's College

Are our deaths bad for us?

I quite like this question because whichever way one answers it, new questions open up. One can distinguish between the process of dying and the state of being dead. The first seems non-problematically something that might well be bad for us (involving suffering), but the second is harder to assess – not least because one can have differing understandings of what the state of being dead is: is it permanent annihilation? Is it somehow waiting unconscious for a resurrection? Is to die simply to be transported instantaneously to some new realm? Or is it something else again? And can one know which? Whichever way the discussion goes, interesting topics branch off. These can include the nature of the self and personal identity; the rationality (or otherwise) of religious beliefs.

There are also different understandings of what ‘badness’ is or would be – are all bad things that happen to us things which affect our consciousness, in which case how could annihilation (if that’s what being dead is) be bad for us? And wider discussions of the nature of value might open up from there. Is there a world of value in some sense ‘out there’, waiting to be discovered, independent of what we might happen to think or feel about it? Or is value more ‘in here’, waiting to be created, depending on our own individual (or societal?) thoughts and feelings? Students might also have different understandings of the ‘us’ in the original question: perhaps it’s good for us as a species that individuals die off; perhaps it’s bad for each of us as individuals that we die off. Perhaps there isn’t an answer that applies across the board to all of us considered as individuals – some individuals’ deaths are bad for them; some aren’t. Questions in practical ethics come up here – to do with euthanasia and the like.

Most people have instinctive reactions to these types of questions, answers that feel right to them without argument. In Philosophy, we are less interested in what that answer or series of answers might be, but how the person developing their



thinking justifies it with argument or adapts it in the light of counterargument; how they respond to new considerations – new conceptual distinctions, new evidence, and so on; how (or if) they spot inconsistencies or growing implausibility as their series of answers and ideas develop, or bonds of mutual support between their answers and ideas.

I'm having trouble with the meaning of three words: Lie, Deceive, Mislead. They seem to mean something a bit similar, but not exactly the same. Help me to sort them out from each other.

When I used this question, candidates adopted a number of strategies. One was to provide definitions of each of them - which turned out to be less easy than one might think without using the other words in the definition. Or they could be contrasted in pairs, or, like a good dictionary, examples might be given of sentences where they are used. No particular strategy was 'correct', and a variety of interesting discussions developed. A few candidates were inclined to think that it might be possible to lie without intending to; most reckoned that one could unintentionally mislead. A fertile line of discussion centred on misleading someone by telling them the truth. When Lucy tries to console Mr Tumnus, the faun, in Narnia, she tells him that he is 'the nicest faun I've ever met'. Which does sound comforting. She's only ever met one faun, though - him - so he's also the nastiest faun she's ever met. If he had felt comforted by her remark, would he have been deceived? And, in saying something true, had she deceived him, or had he deceived himself?

Questions of this sort help us to test a candidate's capacity to draw nuanced distinctions between concepts, and to revise and challenge their own first moves in the light of different sentences containing the key words. Discussion may well lead into areas which could crop up during a degree in philosophy, including questions in ethics, the philosophy of mind and of language. It's not, though, a test of 'philosophical knowledge', and the content of the discussion begins from words which candidates should have a good familiarity with. Until asked this question, they would probably think that they knew their meanings pretty well. Those for whom English isn't a first language might be thought to be at a disadvantage, but they often do strikingly well at such questions, better indeed than native speakers. There may well be reasons for this, which could form the basis of a different interview question.

What exactly do you think is involved in blaming someone?



Questions like this help draw out a candidate's ability to think carefully and precisely about a familiar concept, evaluating proposals, coming up with counter-examples, disentangling considerations, and being creative in proposing alternative approaches. Obviously the notion of blame is an important one in moral theory but insofar as blame is an emotional attitude it also brings in issues in the philosophy of mind. Debates about the nature of blame are going on right now in philosophy so the question is also partly a prompt for doing some philosophy together -- which is exactly what we hope to achieve in a tutorial.

With a question like this we're not looking for a right answer but instead whether the candidate can be creative in coming up with examples and suggestions, and can think critically and carefully through their implications. So, for example, many candidates start out by suggesting that for A to blame B, A would have to think that B had done something wrong. Many also make the point that B needn't actually have done anything wrong. We can use this opening suggestion to consider a simple theory of blame: blame is just thinking that someone has done something wrong. When this is put to candidates, most recognize that blame seems to involve more than this. This shows their capacity to evaluate a proposal, and we'll typically ask them to illustrate their verdict with a counter-example: a case where someone thinks someone has done something wrong but doesn't blame them. Candidates will then be encouraged to offer and test-out more sophisticated proposals about the nature of blame. Some might suggest that blame involves a more complex judgement than just that someone has done something wrong. Others instead might argue that real blame requires feelings of some kind on the part of the blamer: anger, or resentment, for example. And again we can put these proposals to the test by looking for counter-examples. Good interviews will often generate all kinds of interesting and revealing discussions that show a candidate's ability for analytical thought: for example about self-blame, cases of blame where the blamer knew the blamed had done nothing wrong, and indeed cases of blaming something inanimate (such as a faulty printer or phone).