



# STUDYING AT OXFORD

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A GUIDE FOR  
UNDERGRADUATES  
ST HUGH'S COLLEGE



# CONTENTS



- 3 What is this guide for?
- 4 How is Studying at Oxford Different from Studying at School or College?
- 6 The Tutorial System
- 10 Dealing with Problems
- 11 Vacations and Collections
- 13 Examinations
- 15 College and University Regulations
- 18 When you're not working
- 19 Academic Feedback Form

# WHAT IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

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## Professor Robert Vilain

### Senior Tutor

This is an introduction to what is distinctive about studying at Oxford. It is not a general guide to study skills (although it does contain suggestions about where you might go to find out more about these). It is designed to help you make the transition from study at school/college to university study and in particular to Oxford's unique tutorial system.

Because it is aimed at students for all courses, the guide is necessarily general. For advice specific to your subject, the best source of information and advice will be your subject tutors. You will meet them formally in the week you arrive in College, but this will only be the first of many interactions with them over the next three or four years. You may also find it useful to speak to other undergraduates in your subject – including your college 'parents'.

St Hugh's offers 'study skills' support over and above the tuition you receive from academic tutors. We will explain how to access this when you arrive.

If at any point in your studies you are uncertain about how best to work, where to seek the right advice, or how to address most effectively an academic difficulty, you are most welcome to contact me directly. My email address is [senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk) and I try to respond to mails within two working days. I very much enjoy working with students to help them learn, so don't hesitate to get in touch.

# HOW IS STUDYING AT OXFORD DIFFERENT FROM STUDYING AT SCHOOL OR COLLEGE?

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At Oxford we – your tutors and supervisors, the College, and your Departments – are responsible for guiding you towards sources of knowledge, training you, and helping you develop and refine your skills. However, you personally and individually bear overall responsibility for your own intellectual development. A crucial mark of Oxford's distinctiveness is the high degree of academic and intellectual independence we encourage and expect from you. This begins at a basic administrative level:

## **Constructing your timetable and planning your time**

At school or college you will probably have been guided hour-by-hour through every working day, with a clear timetable of 'contact time' with teachers interspersed with 'study periods' or the like. You will probably have had your personal timetable uploaded to your online study space at the start of the year.

At Oxford you will still have centrally determined teaching – core lectures, prescribed tutorial hours, compulsory lab sessions – but no-one will construct your personal timetable for you. You will have to do that for yourself, noting down everything you're required to do, meeting by meeting, entering it into your preferred diary app, and watching out for clashes – especially if you're studying a 'joint school' (e.g. French and Linguistics, Maths and Philosophy, etc.). If you spot a clash, ask your tutor about it as soon as you become aware. Most clashes can be resolved.

At first a high proportion of your lecture courses, lab sessions, or other University teaching events will be compulsory. Sometimes (especially in later years) you will need to work out for yourself whether or not a certain seminar or lecture series is useful to you or not. You can ask your tutors for advice, but the decision will be yours. In some subjects you will be told that you need to attend 'at least X number of a total of Y sessions' to pass the year – it will be up to you how to schedule those.

Don't underestimate how important it is to have these day-to-day things sorted out from the start, no matter how trivial this kind of organisation may seem. Most of us make use of the calendar and 'to do list' functions on our phones and laptops.

Once you have constructed your timetable – usually in Week 0 of each term (the week before teaching starts) – it's up to you how you structure your preparatory work for each tutorial or class. We don't mind when you study, when you write your essays, when you complete your problem sheets, as long as the work is done, done well, and submitted by the deadline given by your tutor. You need to work out quickly what the most productive and creative times for work are for you. Some can work to a simple 9-to-5 schedule; others get up early to work; some work very late; others are adept at squeezing in useful study time between daily lectures and classes – most people need to be flexible and adopt a combination of strategies! Save the most productive time for the most important tasks, which may often be the things you find hardest: this might be planning your essay, working on longer problems, or reading a difficult book or article. Everything else goes into the hours that are left. If you find you are really tired, then you should stop working, and you should always build into your planning some proper time each week away from work. But if you find you're bored, or a bit tired, you can still use the time productively.

Two of the biggest challenges for new students at Oxford are just how much non-timetabled time there is in the week (especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences), and how much reading, thinking, and writing has to be fitted into that time. Try to work out now how many hours of work you can reasonably do in a day, when you will need to get up in the morning, and when you will take time off to do other things (or just do nothing). Your timetable will change even in your first term, but if you start ambitiously, carving out as many hours as you can for your academic work, you will make a success of it. If you need help with this, just ask (see below).

Where you do your preparatory work is up to you. Many people work in their College room, but others prefer to work in libraries (the College Library, faculty or department libraries, or the Bodleian). You may find that you like to work in one place all day, or that you prefer to move to a different library for the afternoons or to do a different kind of work. Be flexible! We are fortunate in that the College Library is open 24/7 and is a popular place to work quietly.



# THE TUTORIAL SYSTEM

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The tutorial system is refreshingly different from the school/college systems of continuous assessment that you may have worked in before. Oxford deliberately chooses to focus on summative assessments at fixed points in your course, meaning that the weekly or fortnightly essay or problem sheet is usually formative rather than summative and therefore does not count towards your degree classification.

Other excellent universities adopt a different approach such that most work submitted in term (from the second year on, at least) counts in some way towards the final degree. Oxford prefers to respect the truly formative elements of a degree, thus reducing pressure on students (because not every written word is assessed), and allowing space for growth and development without the watchful eye of the examiner bearing down upon every word you write.

The Oxford system leaves the tutorial free to become the space in which you can work with your tutor to develop your interests and abilities. Not everything you write and submit will get a mark; nothing outside the formal examination system will contribute towards your degree. This gives you the liberty to experiment with how you approach problems or write essays, trying different methods until you find the most successful. Because your tutorial work doesn't formally count towards your degree, you don't just have to find a template for producing work that will get you the necessary marks (as you may have had to do at school/college). In essay-based subjects in particular, it will take time to develop a strong essay style, and the best way to develop this is to keep writing more essays. Remember that 'essay' is related to the French 'essai' ('attempt'). The first essays you write will be far from perfect, and the point of the tutorial system is to help you get better without penalizing you for early stages in the process of improving. Similarly, you will get better and better at problem sheets, you will develop techniques of understanding and analysis, and the early stages – when you are feeling your way with a new topic and may not always grasp it immediately – do not negatively impact on your final marks.

## The Syllabus

Every subject will supply a handbook or other form of guidance outlining what a student can expect to study for a particular course or paper. If you don't have, or can't find, that guidance, ask your tutor where to get hold of it. But the range of a course or paper may be very large indeed, and no student will be expected to cover it all. You will, in consultation with your tutors, select smaller areas, topics, fields, on which to focus. An examination paper, therefore, may contain many questions that you cannot be expected to answer because you have not covered that sub-section of the overall topic. You will need to sift the paper and select questions that test what you have been taught.

This is quite different from some other universities where every student taking a given course studies exactly the same clearly delimited range of material and where examinations are expected to test knowledge only of that material. In Oxford, your tutor may not have focused on exactly the same things that a tutor in a different college has chosen. This is not a problem. Quite the reverse. But we examine in ways appropriate to the ways in which we teach and you can always expect an exam paper to give you the opportunity to show what you have learned.

Another merit of the Oxford system is that you are often able to construct your own syllabus, to some extent at least. If your chosen paper covers the literature of a given country or culture between, say, 1700 and the present day, you can't possibly cover the whole range, so you can and should discuss with your tutor which topics, areas, shorter periods, genres, forms, etc. you would like to focus on. If your College tutor does not teach all the things you are keen on, they will be happy to find another tutor to cover these for you. In some disciplines, chiefly but not exclusively scientific, Departments will centralize these choices and when you choose components of a large course you will automatically be allocated to a specialist tutor, who may not be your College tutor. Think about what you want to study and why. Ask what's available. Shape your own degree where you possibly can. Oxford gives you more choice in this respect than most other institutions.

## **Marks**

In school modules and exams, it is possible to get full marks, or at least marks in the 80%-90% range, whereas at Oxford this is very nearly impossible, even in areas where there are objectively (or near-objectively) right and wrong answers. You can never know the whole syllabus. You are very unlikely to exhaust the sum of human knowledge in a single exam answer (for which achievement 100% would be appropriate!). This is because degrees at Oxford are strongly connected to the ever-developing research being done by tutors. There is always more to read, and research, and understand, and there are always more problems to solve.

At school/college, as the best students in your field, you may have been used to getting 90% or higher in your exams and assessments. This is because at A-level or equivalent work submitted is usually assessed with reference to a check-list of what might be expected at that level, and a very good student may well tick almost all the boxes on that check-list.

You are very unlikely to gain marks like this in Oxford, even if your achievements are considered first-class. Oxford examiners know very well what can be expected of a student at a given level (Prelim, Mods, FHS), but they very rarely mark according to check-lists. Remember that a first-class mark is 70% or above. In many subjects (especially essay-based subjects), an examination mark of 75% is very high, and a mark of 80% exceptional. In some scientific subjects it is possible to achieve higher marks – your tutors will guide you on what are reasonable expectations. As a rule of thumb, a mark of 70% expresses your tutor's confidence that you are capable of a first in this area; a mark of 75% expresses even greater confidence.

Conversely, if you are getting marks in the 40s, this means your tutor is very concerned – these would translate to a third-class degree, and very few of those are awarded nowadays. This always indicates a serious problem, and it is likely that your tutor will request the Senior Tutor's support in addressing it, which may lead to formal academic support measures.

In general, St Hugh's expects students to be working at 2:1 level or above – i.e. to be obtaining marks of 60% or more. If your formative assessments (including in-College examinations, known as 'collections') regularly suggest achievement at 2:2 or below, you can expect the Senior Tutor to intervene to find out why.

New students are often puzzled if they don't receive numerical marks on all the work done for their tutorials. Some tutors will offer specific numerical marks, others prefer to give a rough indication of where your work might fall within the degree classification system used at Oxford (first, 2:1, 2:2, third), but some will deliberately not do this, preferring instead to encourage students to focus on the nature of the work rather than the assessment system.

You can always expect feedback receive on your work. This includes the oral discussion that you have within the tutorial hour, but it will often also include written feedback. Don't expect 'model answers', 'sample essays', 'fully worked-out problem sheets' as part of your feedback: it is part of Oxford's culture of individual intellectual responsibility not to pretend that there are 'right answers' out there to be imitated or copied. It is up to you to take time after your tutorial to consider what implications the feedback, including discussion, has for your understanding of that week's topic or area, but also what implications it has for how you approach your subject more generally.



## Interaction

It is possible elsewhere to get through a degree without making your individual presence felt, by hiding in a large group, not asking questions, and never volunteering to give a presentation. In Oxford this should not be the norm. It is a privilege to have a large proportion of your teaching delivered in very small groups and in some cases even one-to-one; with that privilege comes the responsibility to make the most of that focused tutorial attention by engaging with it fully.

Ideally you will be expected to participate in your teaching, to ask questions, to volunteer ideas and suggestions, to engage in discussion and debate with others in the room. Many subjects require students themselves to present material in tutorials or classes, so that they learn not only the technical knowledge but the ability to communicate it (the skill of explaining something is quite different from merely understanding it). There is little point in remaining totally silent for a whole term in a philosophy discussion group, for example – your mind is stretched and improved as you make the effort to frame your ideas and communicate them to others.

We recognize that some students find this difficult. Therefore, we will try to make reasonable adjustments to teaching practice if we are aware of issues in individual cases. We want to find ways in which you can best engage with the small-group teaching that is so distinctive in Oxford. You will receive advice in other contexts about how to secure this kind of support, and where the Disability Advisory Service provides a Student Support Plan, it will be shared with all those teaching you so as to help them make these adjustments. If you are in any way uncertain about these matters, please contact either the Senior Tutor ([senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)) or the College Office ([college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)).



# DEALING WITH PROBLEMS

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However well you plan, however hard you work, there will be times when you encounter problems. They may be one-off things like not leaving enough time to do the work and facing some very intense late-night study to complete tasks in time for your tutorial or for the tutor's submission deadline. They may take the form of repeated or regular difficulties in meeting deadlines. There may be longer-term anxiety about working effectively – students sometimes feel 'blocked' and struggle to write at all. None of this is unusual and help is available.

Normally we would expect students to address the one-off problems directly – you may just have to work very late one evening to complete a task. There can hardly be a single student (or tutor, for that matter) who will not recognize that situation, and unwelcome as it may be, a final push of hard work will often sort it out.

If there is a single piece of work that you're struggling with, try some diversionary tactics to break the cycle of frustration – plugging on may be counter-productive. Go for a walk or a run, watch a film or some TV, read a book, play a game, go for coffee with a friend, do your routine shopping a day early. Don't bottle it up. The advice in this guide about working hard isn't meant to frighten you. It's meant to make the work easier, but there may be times when work just won't happen. If you work steadily, these problems are less likely to surface, but if you do hit a wall, and none of your usual strategies works, then you should stop and ask someone for help.

It is almost always worth seeking some kind of help or advice for any issues that recur or that create serious anxiety. Who should you ask and when?

The answer to 'when?' is easy: always seek help as soon as you think it might be useful. Very few academic problems vanish completely by being ignored. The longer you wait, the more serious they become. Those who can help expect to be approached: you are not pestering us, you are not a nuisance, you have the right to expect support of this kind.

- The first answer to 'who?' is the tutor currently teaching you, whether that's a Fellow of the College, a College Lecturer, a Departmental Lecturer or someone else. Try them first: they have the subject-specific knowledge and many ostensibly intractable difficulties can be solved with expert advice.
- Then next suggestion is your College Tutor (or Director of Studies, a term sometimes used in St Hugh's for someone with overall responsibility for a year-group) – they may not be teaching you the subject you're struggling with, but they will nonetheless have relevant expertise.

- Many local problems – problems specific to a particular exercise or topic – benefit from discussion with other students, either members of your own cohort, or more advanced students in the College. They will often be ‘closest’ to the learning issues and therefore well placed to assist. This is not cheating (provided that you’re not copying their work!) – Oxford encourages students to discuss their work amongst themselves.
- If the issues are about general approach or underdeveloped study skills, approach the College’s Learning Development and Support Tutor(s). They are employed to help you with these matters and contact details will be shared as part of your induction.
- If your concerns are more serious, if you simply can’t get into the right learning routine at all, come to talk to the Senior Tutor. He has decades of experience supporting students of all kinds; he will be able to point you to specialist help if need be; but he can offer advice at all levels.

Please do not consider seeking help evidence of weakness or failure. It is usually evidence of strength.

## VACATIONS AND COLLECTIONS

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### **Vacations**

You will find that your weekly reading lists and problem sheets cannot always be finished. This is partly a reflection of the fact that each subject area is huge, but it is also because of the way that terms and vacations work at Oxford. Terms are very short (normally only eight teaching weeks), and it isn’t possible to do all your academic work within term. Tutors plan their reading lists and tasks sheets in the expectation that you will use your vacations to prepare for them or follow up. You may also need to prepare for a collection (see below).

You are expected to use your vacations to go back over your term’s work and read more in the areas you want to focus on, as well as reading and working to prepare for the coming term. Vacations are not holidays! That said, you will need a proper break during each vacation, a period of time – how long is up to you – in which you don’t think about work or College or your degree.

## Collections

There are two sorts of 'collections' at Oxford, but both have the same purpose: to allow you to reflect on what you have done so far and what needs to be done in future.

The first 'collections' you will have will usually be the college examinations at the start of your first Hilary Term (i.e. in January of your first year). Some subjects then hold exams at the start of every successive term. These are a kind of 'mock' exam, often on the topic or area you have been studying during the previous term, sometimes as a way of generating the first essays for a new topic. They do not form part of the formal assessment for your degree, but they will be taken seriously by your tutors, and should be taken seriously by you, as an indication of how well your work is progressing. They will also help you practise your exam technique for formal university examinations.

This kind of collection is held in 0<sup>th</sup> week under formal conditions. Sometimes these will mimic the kind of exam you can expect at Prelim, Mods or FHS level (e.g. electronic submission). At other times, they are traditional 'sit-down, hand-written' papers. You are expected to wear a gown for these collections (but not full sub-fusc).

The other kind of 'collection' is your 'Principal's Collection'. Usually every student meets with the Principal and Senior Tutor, sometimes also your Personal Tutor, once a year to discuss how your work is progressing. These meetings are held to monitor your academic progress, and, in particular, to identify any areas of concern. Their purpose is to ensure that you are working as effectively as possible and that the College is providing the best possible teaching and learning environment for you. If there have been any problems with your academic work, the Principal and your tutor may ask you to give an account of these and you are also likely to be asked to discuss how you plan to ensure that you will be studying effectively in the coming terms. Similarly, if you have any concerns about the academic provision made for you, you should feel free to raise these in your meeting. You can also contact any of the tutors in your subject, the Senior Tutor, or the Principal at any time if you have concerns.



# EXAMINATIONS

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Much formal assessment in Oxford takes place by means of examinations. Some of these are traditional 'sit-down, in-person' timed examinations located either in the Examination Schools in the city centre or in a variety of other venues around Oxford. For these, candidates are required to wear sub-fusc and gowns (the requirements are listed here: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/dress>). Other examinations are by take-home paper. Some examinations are written on specially set-up laptops and the answers uploaded rather than submitted on paper. Some papers are examined by a portfolio of work (essays, etc.) that may take a whole term or more to prepare. Others are dissertation papers, which may take a whole year. Some papers are not examined but 'certified' (i.e. your tutor confirms to the examiners that you have done a certain number of written assignments and attended a certain number of teaching sessions and the examiners grant a pass on that basis). There are other modes of assessment too! Your course handbooks will specify exactly what the requirements are for each paper.

You will be required to confirm the papers you expect to be assessed for at each major stage (Preliminary Examination or Honour Moderations, usually in the first year, but not necessarily) and Final Honour School (final year). It may be possible to correct errors or make changes once these have been confirmed, but you may have to pay an administration fee in that case.

Some students require special arrangements for examinations (extra time, computer instead of hand-written, a particular location). These are complex and take time to put in place. If you think you need such adjustments, you MUST contact the College Office ([college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)) at the earliest possible opportunity. Last-minute adjustments are almost impossible to make, however serious the situation. In the case of illness or other unexpected problems, other adjustments are sometimes possible, including deferring the examinations for a year and suspending studies in the meantime. These are much too complex to summarize here and again are best discussed with the College Office. Please alert the Office as soon as you have any suspicion that you need help with examination matters.

Your tutorials, lectures, labs, and other teaching will prepare you for the examinations and other assessments, and if you have kept good notes, prepared each assignment carefully, and filed the materials you have been given properly, you will be in a good place to revise effectively.

It is always worth double-checking information sources such as the student/course handbook and any online syllabus guidelines provided by the Department. Almost all courses store handbooks, regulations, etc. online so that they are easily accessible. If you can't find these materials, contact your Department.

You may also want to look at past papers and examiners' reports, all of which are available online. There is an online exam paper archive you may wish to consult: <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/collections-and-resources/exam-paper-archive>. Examiners' reports are usually available behind your SSO on Departmental sites and are a step-by-step guide to what went well in that exam and what went badly. They provide 'inside information' about what examiners really want, and are much more reliable than gossip or student rumour.

It is hard to give general advice about examinations, because the expectations in different subjects vary considerably. But there are two things that catch people out every year and are common to almost all subjects.

- **Timing:** If your examination is 3 hours long and you have 3 questions to answer, each of equal weight, then it makes sense to spend about an hour on each of them. If you spend 90 minutes on the first question to make your answer as perfect as possible you may gain a few marks on that question but lose many more because your third answer is 'short-weight'. If you have 10 problems to solve in 2 hours, it makes no sense to spend a whole hour on the first two. Oxford examinations reward consistency: spread your time evenly, spread your effort evenly.
- **Answering the question set:** There can hardly be a student who has not heard their teacher or tutor tell them to 'answer the question on the paper, not the one you wish it had been or the one you answered in your mock paper'. Do not prepare answers and try to plug them into the exam. Prepare examples, illustrations, arguments, etc., but assess which of these are relevant on the basis of the question actually in front of you.

The second issue is especially important in take-home papers (e.g. an exam released at 9 a.m. with a deadline for uploading of 2 p.m. but otherwise no restrictions on what material you may use, what help you might get). It is so easy to take an essay on a related topic that you have worked hard on during term and that your tutor considers to be of first-class standard and upload it with only minor tweaks. This is a recipe for disaster. It is very unlikely indeed that the question you have answered on in term is identical to the one asked in the exam, and that will mean that some (or even most) of your uploaded material is not in fact sufficiently relevant to the exam question. These essays are penalized heavily. Read the examiners' reports for such papers: they will all make reference to this issue.

It is rare for undergraduates to fail their First Public Examination (Prelim/Mods), and those who fail one or more parts of this examination are given one opportunity to re-sit papers. Those who do not pass at resit are not permitted to continue at Oxford.

Finally, you will find that in Oxford (as indeed in almost all universities) the examiners' academic judgement is final. You cannot appeal against a mark because you think the examiners have failed to see the quality of your work. Most assessments are double-marked (especially at FHS level), so two experts have considered your work. If any queries are raised by either examiner, an external examiner is consulted, so a third voice has been heard.

# COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS

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## Academic Conduct

The Proctors' Office produce the 'University Student Handbook', which can be found online at [www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/student-handbook?wssl=1](http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/student-handbook?wssl=1)). This sets out a range of information about the University, including notes on examinations. This document is the official version of what is said above, namely that University examinations at Oxford are subject to a rigorous process of marking which does not allow for remarking or for appeals against marks (unless there is clear evidence of a flaw in the examination process).

Appeals are possible on procedural grounds, but given how careful Oxford examination boards are with their processes, they are not often successful. If you believe you have grounds for an appeal, contact the Senior Tutor or the College Office and they will advise.

The College and the University have regulations relating to academic conduct, standards and discipline. These regulations ensure that undergraduates are aware of what is expected of them and of the support to which they are entitled. There is a link above to the University Student Handbook. The University website has a wealth of regulatory material that you may not want to read in advance, but which may help if you encounter difficulties.

The College has its own guidelines in cases where an undergraduate's academic work is not satisfactory. They are enshrined in Appendix B of the College's Bylaws, and can be accessed here: <https://www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Appendix-B-of-the-College-Bylaws.pdf>. These are intended as support mechanisms, and indeed almost all students who have encountered them agree that they have been helpful rather than punitive.

The 'headline statement' is, logically enough, in paragraph 1.1: 'St Hugh's College expects all undergraduates to pursue their academic studies diligently and to the satisfaction of their tutors so that they may fully realize their academic potential.' If your tutors are concerned that this is not the case, they will follow these procedures and may invite the Senior Tutor to assist in resolution of difficulties.

This document is not the place to revisit, rehearse, or summarize these regulations. You can read them now if you wish. You will be sent them if there is a formal investigation of your work, in which case it is very much in your interests to read them carefully.

These procedures include the College regulations on plagiarism and other academic offences (section 3, pages 58-60). We define plagiarism thus: 'Plagiarism is presenting someone else's work, ideas, or phrasing as your own, with or without their consent, by incorporating it into your work without appropriate acknowledgement or reference. All published and unpublished source material, whether in manuscript, printed, electronic or other form, is covered under this definition.'

Please be aware of this and guard against accidental plagiarism. It is easy when submitting work for assessment to include phrases, sentences, examples, whole paragraphs that you have included in your notes but where the ideas and words are not yours but other people's – this is normal, we all note down other people's thinking on the topic that currently interests us.

HOWEVER, we must also always note down the source of those ideas and words; we must put quotation marks round phrasing that is not ours but someone else's; if we summarize a complex argument using the examples of another author, we must put in a note to say that this is what we are doing. Acknowledging academic support is a strength, not a weakness. Scholars almost always build on others' work. Many academics are proud of their footnote-count! If you screen-shot a quotation or an image or an equation and paste it into a document with your notes, then include the URL. If you make hand-written or typed notes of examples or ideas from a printed article, include the author, title, journal, date, page references as well.

Sometimes, regrettably, plagiarism is conscious. Individuals sometimes resort to it because they run out of time, because they don't fully understand the task at hand, or even just because they're lazy and want to get a task sorted in as little time as possible. Tutors and examiners won't spot every instance, but they will spot many of them – it's really not worth taking the risk, because the penalties are very severe indeed. Being found guilty of plagiarism will remain on your college record and may feature in references in future.

## AI

To what extent is the use of AI plagiarism? Are students allowed to use AI at all? If so, how and when?

AI is with us to stay. Substantial elements of what we consume from the web or via the media is AI-generated, AI-influenced, AI-shaped in some form or another. Very few of us are in a position to identify with any precision everything that we encounter that has an element of AI influence in it.

AI is useful. Many of your tutors use it in various forms to save time and to locate information that a regular search doesn't uncover. Experts use it to generate code, translate large passages of text, summarize a range of sources, check for errors, and so on. DPhil students in some fields are actively encouraged to run their work through appropriate AI tools to help pinpoint tiny errors or inconsistencies. No modern university can possibly wish to ban it; none is in a position to police such a ban with total reliability.

**What we can do**, and what we insist on, is to require and encourage any use of AI to be ethically and educationally responsible. 'Responsible' includes using technology to supplement and improve your own work. 'Irresponsible' includes using technology to do the work for you, instead of you doing it yourself.

An important rule of thumb is this: you must always be in a position to check what AI offers you – most online tools warn that AI-generated responses may contain errors, and anyone who uses AI regularly knows that there are many, many errors in what is produced – the internet is littered with stories of AI generating fake references, fictional events, and inaccurate data. If you can't check, you are the slave of AI and not its master. Without implying any disrespect to students at early stages of the learning curve, most are not likely genuinely to be masters of what AI generates. Their tutors are in a better position, because of their greater experience and fuller knowledge.

The DPhil student who uses AI to write code to speed up a task is in a position to check the code – they know that AI often produces plausible gibberish and can adjust for it because they already know their subject very well indeed. If you're a student, and still learning the basics, you may not be as confident about identifying weak material. Modern languages tutors who use AI to generate a quick first draft of texts in foreign languages are in a position to edit, refine, and rewrite what is produced and make it authentically their own because they are fluent in their languages and experts in stylistic analysis. As a student, you may well not be.

As a student you need to reflect on whether AI helps you learn or whether you are using it inappropriately instead of doing the learning yourself.

We all know that ChatGPT can produce a relatively plausible essay on almost any topic; a skilled user can get it to write such an essay in the style of a first-year undergraduate or in the style of a postgraduate; a very skilled user can train it to include certain features that make it even more plausible to a casual reader. But if you get a machine to write the essay in 10 minutes and spend no time processing the material yourself – reading the sources, structuring an essay yourself, weighing up the arguments, being alert for details that might shift those arguments – you won't have learned anything like enough, either for your own intellectual satisfaction or to the satisfaction of an examiner in finals. One tutor in sciences sighed when recounting a spate of AI-generated essays and reflected, 'the trouble is, AI is great at producing stuff that looks sophisticated if you don't know what you're talking about, but most of it is actually almost entirely content-free, and it only takes ten seconds to spot that'.

The 10-minute machine solution might look more attractive than the 2- or 3-day session in the library reading, thinking, and writing, but it's not the same as learning and you will – one way or another – pay a price for that. The price may 'only' be that you learn less and fail to develop your skills. But if a tutor suspects that AI is being used inappropriately in this kind of way, it is not very difficult to produce evidence to underpin that suspicion. Again, this may affect references provided in future.

# WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING

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This guide is all about how to work and work successfully, but it is important to realise that although you should work very hard, you must not work all the time. Partly this is because you will be at your most academically creative and productive if you allow time to rest and recharge. But partly it is because, although you are here to do a degree, you are also here to do many other things. You will need to find a balance: keep up the interests you had in sport or music or drama or volunteering (or whatever else) at school/college and take the opportunity to develop new interests too. Make sure you spend plenty of time with your friends, that you get enough rest, and that you eat properly. Undergraduates are always tired at the end of a busy term, but you should never feel so exhausted that you can't enjoy your work and other things too.

If you do find yourself overwhelmed at any time, please remember there are lots of people you can talk to who will be able to help. Your personal tutor, the Senior Tutor and Academic Registrar, the College Nurse, your college parents, peer supporters, the JCR's welfare reps, the College Counsellor and the University's Counselling Service are all there to help out if you need them. You should never feel embarrassed to talk to someone about any problems you have. Studying at Oxford is very different from anything you will have done before or will do again, and it's enormously exciting, but it can take time for new undergraduates to adjust to the way Oxford works.



# ACADEMIC FEEDBACK FORM

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[www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/currentstudents/academic-feedback-form/](http://www.st-hughs.ox.ac.uk/currentstudents/academic-feedback-form/)

Students are encouraged to use the online form to help the College to improve all aspects of its academic provision. Possible examples include:

- To give feedback (positive or negative) on a term's tuition
- To share comments about the syllabus or course materials for a particular option
- To comment on facilities (e.g., library provision, accessibility, disability support)
- To give feedback on particular tutors – College and External
- To suggest ideas for improvements and future initiatives

Feedback will be reviewed throughout the year by the Senior Tutor and discussed with organising tutors where appropriate. Please note that this form is for both anonymous and named feedback.

Whilst St Hugh's does its best to ensure that the teaching provided is the best it can possibly be, individual students or groups do sometimes experience problems. In the past, on a very few occasions, we have had to intervene and we have done so successfully. You are welcome to use this feedback form to raise these issues, but they are most quickly addressed via an email to the Senior Tutor.

If you would like to discuss a matter urgently then please contact the College Office ([college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:college.office@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)) or the Senior Tutor ([senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk](mailto:senior.tutor@st-hughs.ox.ac.uk)).

