

Top Tips for Oxford Interviews: English

By Grace Walters

Prepare for the opening questions

Have a ready answer to the ‘simpler’ questions, which can catch you off guard with how foundational but difficult-to-encompass they are – e.g. “What’s the point of studying English? What is your favourite part of the subject? Tell me your favourite book.” They’ll often use this question at the very beginning in order to pick up on a specific point that you say, and then delve into that in more detail. It’s to warm you up, and not an answer they’re going to entirely judge you on – I remember thinking, ‘Oh no. This is it. The easiest and most crucial question of all, and I’ve gone blank.’ But it’s just a starter, and one out of many questions.

Don’t overthink it

I came out of my interview convinced that I’d missed my place completely! This is why I so often advise people not to over-think how things went, because it’s such a surreal and naturally intense scenario that it’s so hard to gauge. The best thing you can do before the interview is find a calm place to ground yourself (as cringey as that sounds). Try to focus on enjoying an intellectual discussion with some of the smartest people in your field! This alone is an amazing achievement.

Rethink the mindset that they’re trying to ‘catch you out’ – for example, not knowing a character name or having a mind blank about a question is so, so normal, and definitely happened to me. I dealt with it by saying, “I’m sorry, but I’m honestly struggling to remember that specific detail. If you could maybe remind me, then I can move onto my next point?”

Try not to stress about the time ‘limit’ on interviews. This is a hard one, but finding a calm headspace and not being overly aware of the time structure of your interview will make for a more natural flow of academic conversation, which is the goal. Most people say that they felt as if they blinked and then the interview was over, it’s that surreal an experience. So I would caution: don’t watch the clock, just relax and relish the experience to have such a rigorous intellectual discussion.

Be prepared to get out of your comfort zone

Instead of ‘catching you out’, what the interviews are trying to do is to push you out of your comfort zone, getting you to roll with the punches and to think on your feet. You’ll be adding elements of their suggested points to your own core beliefs about literature whilst also showing yourself as willing to fight your corner if you disagree. Even if it feels as if the interviews go badly, please remember that it isn’t as earth-shattering as it feels: they’ll also have your personal statement, ELAT, written work, etc., to assess holistically.

You warm up!

Something that surprised me is how quickly the interview seemed to fly. And how much easier it got, question by question. The first question, you’re very nervous and not quite warmed up, so it can feel as if it goes very badly – but don’t over-focus on this, just keep going. They know that the first question is always a bit shaky, so they’ll really just be thinking about what point they want to pick out and focus on.

My interview experience was very much just a mock tutorial, and while I felt – and still feel – as if I made multiple mistakes, very few intelligent points, and a lot of waffling, they are looking for someone engaging and passionate. So, try to smile, listen to the questions, roll with the punches,

and remember: they're not trying to catch you out, they're pushing you out of your comfort zone so that you think conceptually and theoretically. There's definitely a difference!

Finally, apart from refreshing your knowledge of your personal statement (sitting with it for a while and thinking critically about every text and point, as well as being able to connect it to wider reading) and re-reading your written work, the best way you can possibly prepare is by feeling calm and relaxed. That's why, as much as it can seem that some people are more unfairly 'prepared' than others (such as school mock interviews or expensive course) the only real advantage is just how passionate and confident you can encourage yourself to feel, which is ultimately something you can achieve entirely on your own. It's obviously a big ask during such a pressurised scenario, but you've put in so much effort to get this far, and the tutors obviously see potential in you, so you should have lots of faith!

By Grace Walters.