

TIPS ON CLASSES AND SEMINARS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates coming into their second or even their third year of the Cambridge English course at Caius, as an introduction to what in most cases will be a somewhat unfamiliar kind of teaching situation. You will quickly have become familiar with the practice of supervisions and of lectures (see the documents with tips on both of these teaching formats), and then subsequently you will be likely to encounter a somewhat hybrid arrangement that will be identified as a class or a seminar.

2. These two formats are often quite closely similar in arrangements and in purpose. In both cases an organised group of students meets regularly together for planned discussion of pre-nominated topics, often once per week throughout a term, under the governance of one or more convenors who will devise and plan the structure, announce the practice to be followed, and give both collective and individual guidance to the participants. Often the scope of a class or seminar will be linked to a specific segment of a Tripos curriculum, or to preparing for exam work on a specified topic or set text(s). Sometimes the aim may be very distinctly focussed, e.g., on exactly close knowledge of the text of a Shakespeare play; sometimes the aim may be large and synoptic, e.g., theories of tragedy. Yet again, college-based classes may be devoted to building up secure understanding of a foreign language; or they may be a forum for exploratory discussions of, e.g., a practical criticism kind. Usually the supervising teacher or lecturer (the convenor) will not be apart during sessions, behind a lectern or up on a platform, but sitting at a table with the rest of the group in a more domestic or republican deployment.

3. If there is a difference between the two terms, it might be said that classes frequently have the somewhat more modest-level purpose of securing a proficiency in particular skills, with practice and evaluation of progress and regular (often written) exercise work which will be marked with comments and a grade by a supervising teacher; whereas seminars are sometimes more advanced and intellectually challenging, with all participants taking part in group discussions and possibly also with individuals presenting short papers of their own composition on critical or analytic problems within the context of the overall thematic scope. But the difference is not hard-and-fast.

4. Either kind of arrangement (class or seminar) may be initiated within a college, so that you will all know each other; or be set up by the Faculty, so that the group may be drawn from different colleges though usually from within the same overall year-group. Occasionally there are graduate seminars which certain third-year undergraduates may be permitted to join. You may be nominated by your Director of Studies for inclusion in a class or classes, or you may have the option to choose for yourself whether to sign up for one or more seminars. It is quite common for Faculty teaching in the third year, especially when related to Part II special author or special subject Tripos options, to be taught by means of seminar offerings, which you may build into your plan of work depending on your option choices and your workload commitments. Some advanced seminars may invite guest speakers, from

outside the English Faculty or from outside Cambridge, to individual sessions. Attendance at a class may give rise to a supervision report, which only rarely happens in the case of seminars.

5. There are some features here which differ distinctly from those applying to lectures, or to supervisions. First, once you commit (or are committed) to a class or seminar, regular attendance is seriously mandatory. If you absolutely are prevented from attending a session you must notify the convenor beforehand by means of an apology for absence (be sure to have a contact e-mail address in case it may be needed); if this is not done, a small group can fall into incoherence and the work of others be thrown into disorder, especially towards the end of a busy term. The group should ideally be quite small (approx. 8-15), and so each member is under strong obligation to collaborate fully and positively. And second, attendance is quite unproductive, for you or for the rest of the class or seminar, unless you prepare fully for each session as well as becoming well-informed about the overall aims and ideas involved, thinking out issues and pushing ahead with exploring them in advance. There are (or should be) no passenger or discount tickets on offer.

6. What does this mean in real-life terms? It means well-controlled good practice and good discipline. There are likely to be schedules of reading and topic-sequences issued in advance, possibly at special group meetings called for these purposes. Do not on any account miss such a meeting; be prompt in attendance, collect all the reading lists and timetable outlines, and if volunteers for papers or presentations are called for, give serious consideration to volunteering for such a task yourself. Giving one of these presentations will bring you closely to grips with challenges of reading and insight, and will probably earn you some individual guidance in preparing your topic (perhaps, indeed, a full private supervision); but you for your part must write or talk closely to the scale of production required, and must absolutely be on time with preparation or handing-in. The reading lists are likely to include a select group of central or core text materials which you must commit to obtaining and reading carefully before the relevant session, possibly during the vacation prior to the series of meetings; you will need to keep careful notes, and also to peruse as much as possible of the further background or secondary reading. At each session there may be regular hand-outs of further material, and you may be invited on occasion to prepare such material for the group. Keep your dossier complete and in good order.

7. This full preparation will enable you to be focussed during actual sessions, and yourself to contribute to the debate. Within a group context, it is important to recognise the need for alertness, good information, and discipline in contributing to the progress of discussion. These requirements are similar to those for supervisions, but the seminar environment may be more formal as well as more populous and under tighter topic guidance. Do not ask vapid questions, stray off topic, become argumentative or use a blurred vocabulary; take your turn, speak clearly and economically, with courtesy to other members; do not just sit silent and scribe out notes of seemingly useful points, but equally do not become tiresomely loquacious, even if you seem to yourself rather distinctly well-prepared. Remember that your own interventions do not need to be polished or presented as certainties;

collectively you are exploring ideas, trying out ways of approaching text material or framing an argument. It is good to experiment with thought-links or tentative re-definitions, to pick up the ideas of others in a constructive way and in particular to present disagreeing comments as positive steps forward.

8. There is a dual aim in all this: the group is trying to practise relevant forms of analysis and critical or historical enquiry so as to reach stages towards consensus or at least towards a clarified sense of credible disagreements; the individual participant is trying to work out and test and define a personal viewpoint, concordant with individual critical priorities and principles. Common to both is the emphasis on focussed method in analysis and discussion, and the efficient protocols of shared debate, including the adjunct tasks of mutual courtesy and good humour. It is also good to keep a close eye on the underlying text-materials at stake in the discussion, referring points to the text of detailed aspects or passages in the text-argument. Different seminar groups develop their own characteristic moods and procedures; quite soon you should be able to tune in and sense how best to play your part. There is a tacit code of practice of disciplined good behaviour involved, if a class or seminar is to be successful for all its members. Watch for signs of this code, especially from the convenor (the supervising teacher or lecturer), learn the rules quickly, and adhere closely to them; because they can be a significant element in your own training and development.

9. Taking notes at a seminar has similarities with what you will do at lectures; but since during seminar discussion you are in interactive mode, thinking about points and arguments, following threads with a view to contributing your own thoughts, your note-taking will be less coherently focussed, and the resultant notes will need amplification and clarifying when the seminar session is concluded and you are taking stock of its outcome. If there were handouts, or if there was extensive reference to specific passages in the texts under study, you will need to ensure that your notes are intelligibly cross-referenced to these materials, since what seemed like an obvious connection at the time may be harder to reconstruct in more distant retrospect. As a passing caution, remember that if you are committing your notes to word-processed text, label each document in clear sequence and don't forget to keep backup copies of files you can't afford to lose.

10. If you are involved in, or are assigned to, a text-based class, for example studying a set Shakespeare play or a period core text, be sure that you arrange well in advance to own a copy of the recommended edition, so that you can in good time start to work closely on annotation and analysis. If the class is directed towards language-learning, be sure that the recommended essential reference works (dictionaries, review grammars) are in your possession or reliably available. Do not hand in work set for you without giving yourself opportunity beforehand to check it through for mistakes. More generally, do not regard detailed study of this kind as secondary to grasping after more exalted ideas, and cramp the time available; a major virtue in this kind of work is regularity and precision with particulars, and if you do not clear your mind to achieve a good rhythm of concentration, you will not achieve consistent standards. Precision is a habit of mind and can be cultivated; it may not be the grandest ultimate attainment, but without it many grander projects become compromised.

11. During the sequence of programmed sessions you may be invited, or required, to make an oral presentation or deliver a short paper. This will be an important opportunity for you and will require careful preparation. First, find out clearly and specifically what it is that you are to do, when and for how long, on what topic and with what kind of purpose in view. If you have any doubts about these aspects, ask the convenor to confirm the details. You may be offered the opportunity to discuss your material with the convenor at a separate meeting beforehand; if so, be well prepared for what could be very productive for you. Your ration of session time is likely to be quite brief (usually not more than 10 minutes), and so you must be economical. Remember that your presentation is a contribution to group working, to engage in the continuing discussion of themes and issues, to promote enquiry within the group and to provide a platform of information and argument so as to give focus to part of the collective project. It is not merely your chance to demonstrate amazing erudition or contrarian disagreements, nor to impress senior members of the group.

12. To this end it may be appropriate within your allotted span to raise questions, identify significant differences of opinion or judgement, or to extend the road map of those links in the project that lie ahead; in other words, to open up the context and to draw out further debate. Or (also) you may seek to review areas of discussion already explored, to summarise and consolidate. Or you may be assigned a specific task, to introduce a new text or to report on the main lines in the recent history of a scholarly or critical disagreement. In a class (as opposed to a seminar) your more modest task may be to provide explication and commentary on an assigned section of text; or for instance to review production questions in the context of a theatrical realisation, or the main outlines of an extended publication history. Or your assignment may be more literary-critical, to analyse and work out approaches to understanding and judgement of a nominated piece of writing; or you may be invited yourself to select the text material.

13. Whatever is the scope of your individual project, be sure to prepare fully so that your presentation is succinct and lively and well-argued. If you are introducing (other) specific passages of text into your discussion, you may prepare handout sheets so that participants around the table can have these passages immediately before them and available to take away for further study. Whenever you transcribe a text passage you should always check for accuracy and give correct reference to its source; if appropriate, you can also supply reference to supplementary source materials, within reasonable bounds. Sometimes it may be enlightening to bring along visual materials, for example facsimiles of text, or books containing photographs, maps or illustrations, to hand around the table.

14. Find out whether you are to produce a written submission which is to be handed in, or whether (more usual) you are to make an oral presentation without requirement also to provide a transcript. If the latter, there is much merit in not merely reading out from paper your thoughts and points of argument; it will be much more lively and engaging if you speak from notes and to some extent shape your sentences as if they are part of a conversation (which they are). Oral presentation needs specially careful preparation, and also practice. Plan your headings and the internal sequence; keep close

control of timing. Try not to be nervous, and remember that the other participants are all on your side; in particular, take up a good position where you have effective eye-contact, speak distinctly and not too fast (so that you can be heard), and pause between internal shifts and transits in your treatment, so that the articulation of your overall material emerges into clear view. When your main piece is done there will likely be questions and discussion; in some cases you are being given opportunity to explain or qualify points already made, or to extend a point to a further stage; in other cases the questions may not be directed at you but aimed towards more general discussion around the table. The convenor will guide and shape these interchanges, and so you should look out for cues.

15. After each session is concluded, as with a supervision, set yourself an interval (not too long after) of review and reflection, clarifying your notes and identifying problems still unclear to you or needing further enquiry. Remember that unlike supervision arrangements, a class or seminar series may not require any written work from you, unless you may be formally asked for one piece or may opt to produce one; but you perhaps ought to plan out possibly extended notes or even composed outline arguments, if only because they will sharpen your thinking and assist with exam preparation in due course. Try to look ahead to the next session too, and attempt to discern some larger tendencies in the way your group project is shaping up. Press forward with some thoughts and reading and part-drafting for your individual presentation if you are to make one, well ahead of the few days beforehand; you may benefit from side-discussions with one or more of the other group members if you are or have become acquainted with them. The most important consideration overall with this mode of group working is to keep focussed, prepare fully, and to recognise that you contribute best to yourself when you contribute well to the group, over the full span of its duration.

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Gonville and Caius College,
1st January 2004

PDF file created on 2 June 2006