

TIPS ON COMPUTING (BRIEF), FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, though they may have a use for students at a later stage, as a reminder. Your first few weeks in Cambridge will pitch you into many new activities, which you will need to learn to manage, and some of them may to some of you seem rather formidably technical. Take comfort from the fact that all your contemporaries are in the same boat; and meanwhile the following survival guide may assist you.
2. University and College life at Cambridge has moved rather decisively into the electronic age. Many of you will have been introduced to basic information technology (IT) while at school, and some of you may by now be old hands. But if you are a novice, or mostly so, there are no major problems ahead except not being daunted by fairly basic arrangements and skill requirements. For some courses of study here the impact of IT has major central implications, while for others the effect is more marginal. The study of English is less affected than some other courses of study, but you will find it a shrewd tactic to become proficient in the basics and probably to acquire some basic hardware of your own. Prices for sensibly adequate units have become much less punishing over recent years; but remember to ensure that any purchased equipment comes with warranty protection, and that replacement components and consumables (diskettes, inkjet cartridges, etc) are easily available.
3. The principal mainstream uses of IT for students of English can be grouped into categories of communication, information retrieval, and text production and storage. The first and second of these functions require access to computer networks, and the third may also do so.
4. With regard to network access while at Cambridge, each new undergraduate will be issued with (a) a personal userID (CRSID) which is a code identifier specific to yourself for the purposes of using computer workstations and logging into various networks, and (b) an unique personal computer-system password which is a further security device which protects the system and also your work stored on it. You will also receive a Caius swipe-card, which is an electronic key to various security locks; this too is specific to the individual owner, and amongst other functions it gives access to the College's computer rooms where student workstations are located.
5. With regard to communication, an immediate and continuing advantage of network access is the use of e-mail programmes and links, which enable you to send and receive electronic mail via the local system to and from e-mail addresses world-wide. If you are already familiar with e-mail and have your own account with an universal provider (such as yahoo or hotmail) you may of course continue to operate additionally within these systems; they are sometimes specially useful if you travel abroad and wish to keep in contact; but your principal e-mail account while you are at Cambridge will be located within the University network mail system (HERMES, in most cases), and will be accessed by your userID (CRSID) and password; if you operate more than

one e-mail account you will need to assign clear divisions to different types and channels of traffic. For newcomers to e-mail there are many opportunities to learn the basics, which you will need to do because both the College and the Faculty of English will regularly send messages to you through this channel. General announcements and also specific requests or instructions will be directed to your electronic mailbox, which you will need to open more or less daily during term, and often you will need to reply promptly to such messages or take other appropriate action. One small further point: when writing your e-mail address into a data sheet or applications form, etc, be sure to write very carefully and legibly--it is easy for figure 1 to be confused with lower-case letter l, and upper-case letter O to be confused with figure 0, and a mistake here could mean that important messages might never reach you.

6. With regard to information retrieval, you will find that many reading lists issued by the English Faculty via the Faculty website and also by certain supervisors are conveniently available over the network, across links which you can access at any time. In due course you may want to download and/or print out the lists covering periods or topics on which you are working; if you copy them into your own word-processing system and save them as files, they will give you the added usefulness of being searchable by author or keyword. Descriptive notes on Faculty teaching courses and lectures can be accessed online and can likewise be downloaded. Virtually all library catalogues within the Cambridge system are presented online interactively, and you will be instructed by Caius Library staff, early in your first term, how to make use of these systems (in basic procedure they are not too difficult). The College website contains much useful information, and many university clubs and societies maintain their own sites and electronic channels of communication; remember that the document you are reading now is mounted on the Caius website, together with assorted other tips for students of English. Much information which will be useful to you at various stages of your course is dispersed through the internet, discoverable by use of electronic search engines, which also will be explained to you; and there are many database sites containing electronic full-texts and dictionaries and information about authors and books which will supplement information from more traditional printed works of reference.

7. Further specific resources for academic and study uses of the internet will unfold as you become more experienced and according to your own needs and interests. There are many online search facilities for tracking down information, such as Google, and there are specialist text-sites for students of English such as LION (Literature ONline) and the new Google Print. There are remote-access interactive library catalogue sites known as OPACs (Online Public Access Catalogues) which can be searched from any workstation with appropriate links; ask our Caius Library staff to help you to use these. There are useful published summary guides such as *Internet Resources for English*, a booklet provided by HUMBUL (which maintains a well-planned information website with many links and connections, at <http://www.humbul.ac.uk>); this booklet may be downloaded or consulted on application to the Caius Library staff. Further information in this area may be discovered via the Cambridge English Faculty's own website; but do not fret yourself about these resources

in your early days, and remember that internet information is very often faulty and out-of-date. Users need to be alertly sceptical, and to remember also that surfing for possibly interesting material can be a great waste of precious time.

8. With regard to text production, it is probably sensible for you to learn the use of an up-to-date windows-based word-processing package, and to become comfortable in generating and storing text; this is partly so that you can organise certain aspects of your day-to-day study routine in an efficient modern way, but particularly so as to be all prepared in good time for the production of dissertations. These are not weekly essays (which may of course be hand-written) but more extended compositions submitted at the end of your second and third years as part of the examination process; dissertations are required to be typed or word-processed, and it is very advantageous if you are able to take charge of this for yourself. MicroSoft Word and similar programmes also allow you to maintain your own searchable archives of previous work and reference materials, and (which may save you some embarrassments) incorporate a spellcheck facility; as a concluding refinement you may even acquire the knack of paginating a document and then word-counting its text page by separate page. Since preparing a dissertation (and to a lesser extent essays for a portfolio submission) require much re-drafting and developing of a first basic text, the computerised mode of production is ideal for this purpose. You do not need at this stage to worry at all about these later tasks in any detail; but it does make sense to take or consolidate your simple first steps in confident word-processing.

9. What will be your equipment needs? The College provides a full range of workstations (with printers etc) and terminals which you are free to use once your login details are set up and active; there is normally no charge for using these workstations, although you will need to obtain and bring your own diskettes, CDs or ZIP-disks and your own supply of paper for printing tasks. It is quite possible to confine all your IT activities to public-access facilities, while you are in residence (i.e., not including vacations). But many undergraduates do find it convenient to possess and bring to Cambridge some basic hardware of their own. The major choice here is whether to opt for a personal computer (PC) or Mac with supplementary items like a basic printer, or whether to choose a laptop which performs similar functions, requiring also a dedicated rechargeable battery and (also dedicated) voltage adaptor; a PC/Mac is more bulky and less portable but (function for function) usually somewhat less expensive, whereas a laptop can be taken with you to libraries etc, and used in close proximity to study work undertaken there.

10. Soon after your arrival at Caius you should receive an introductory booklet, *Guide to College Computing Facilities*, which sets out in brief the main features of our local computing service, and also introduces university-wide services and sources of advice about their use; you can also (when you know how) consult the Caius online tips on working with computers, located at <http://www.cai.cam.ac.uk/college/computing>. The College maintains a professional computing staff, located in the basement of the Cockerell Building, below the College Library, who are available during specified opening hours to give basic advice about your individual equipment needs and also how you might set up your personal computing environment; you

should be sure to consult closely with one of them, or with some other comparably professional source, before you take a costly plunge into the purchase of new hardware. Bear in mind too that when you are at home for the vacations you may well need to continue with computer-based working and may thus find a more lightweight and compact laptop more easily able to be transported back and forth; if there is also computing equipment permanently at home which you can use, make sure that it is fully compatible with what you will be using at Cambridge. If you already possess sensible equipment before you come into residence, bring it up with you. If you are offered financial help towards an upgrade (e.g. as an university start-up present from helpful family), it may be worth deferring actual purchases until you have been able to take advice here about your likely needs.

11. Some but not all college rooms at Caius are wired up with links to the main servers and thus to the university network and beyond. This may possibly sound mysterious to you if you are a computing beginner, but it is not really complicated and will soon become clear. If your room has this facility (for which there is a small extra charge included in the rental) you can work online with the PC/Mac or laptop inside your own room, once the necessary connections have been installed, receiving and sending e-mails and downloading study materials from outside your own internal system. But even if you do not have such a link you can perform most of your domestic word-processing and IT work within your own hardware, and from public terminals copy on to disk any outside materials that you may wish to load into your domestic system. Alternatively, if at least to start with you so choose, you can do all your computing from public workstations using pre-loaded software, saving your work to allocated storage space within the system and keeping backup copies on your own disks (diskettes, CDs or ZIP-disks). All of your e-mail traffic, whether incoming or outgoing, can in any case be saved within the network system, no matter where you access it from, so long as you do not exceed your storage space allocation. With a little practice your chosen version of these housekeeping methods can become regular and automatic.

12. Once you have your own routine arrangements in place and working smoothly they can slip into the background of your college and study life. Technical problems if and as they arise can be referred to our ever-helpful and friendly computing staff. Remember always to keep separate backup copies of all your working files, both active and in deep storage, and update them regularly, because otherwise loss of data might compromise much previous effort. At all times when working on a document, save it frequently as you go, since an accidental slip of the finger can irrevocably delete a full cohort of best thoughts; if your session is at a public workstation, go armed with a formatted diskette, and regularly save your work to that. If as you work some apparently dire emergency transfixes you into terror, with some fierce warning message that you have never seen before flashing on your monitor screen, keep calm and don't panic; in almost every case it is quite safe to take a deep breath, consult your instruction manuals, or make an excursion to seek help. Don't switch off any of your equipment, just leave it running and flashing, overnight if necessary, until the sheriff arrives.

13. Remember to keep hardware secure since it is attractive to thieves, and

to include it amongst your personally insured items; if you leave your room unattended for more than a brief absence (e.g. vacations), do not leave your equipment visibly on display, and try not to leave your laptop unsecured and out of your sight on a library desk, even for a few minutes; also, switch off computing equipment at the mains when there is any possible danger that it might comprise a fire hazard. If you carry equipment around, remember that severe jolts can be damaging, and remember too that batteries need to be kept fully recharged, or they will surely peter out just when you most need them (nerd's law). In addition, computer keyboards, printers and the like do not respond well to repeat doses of cigarette ash, diet coke, or assorted crumbs from biscuit snacks; and during hot weather the sun may traverse across the sky while you are out, to strike at full blast into your window and bake all your equipment to a frazzle. (The same goes also for books: don't leave them in fierce hot sunlight, which can be at least as hurtful as rain and wet.)

14. There is absolutely nothing to fear from computers, except a slight tendency which they have to crowd into one's life and solicit more attention than they warrant. A good piece of advice is to make friends with someone who knows a lot more about them than you do. Sensible housekeeping and a few friendly pats are otherwise all they require to give dependably useful service.

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Gonville and Caius College,
1st January 2003

PDF file created on 25 April 2006