

## TIPS ON ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. What follows are some explanatory notes concerning original compositions within the English Tripos, together with some wider and larger points concerning creative work and possible roles that it might play in your English course.
2. To establish a context, reflect that a degree course in English literature brings you into intensive daily contact with creative work in the English language of extraordinary variety and quality, including in its range a whole developing sequence of historical types and experiments; you will be closely intimate with unquestioned masterpieces of the most dazzling originality and imaginative intelligence, exploring their most inward qualities and technical achievements so that you may both understand them and gauge their powers.
3. Some students of English will bring with them their own hopes that they may feel stimulated to attempt original writing work for themselves; in journalism or reviewing or in directly creative work like writing or adapting plays, composing short stories, writing the wittiest first novel since *Beowulf* or dashing off song lyrics that will set the Brixton Academy on fire. Some will have plans or hopes for opportunities within a career after graduation that will give scope for work in publishing or programme-making or simply private experiments towards the life of a novelist or poet, as alternatives (or more likely supplements) to safer and saner options leading on downwards into accountancy or commerce.
4. And yet during a degree course in English the task of the student of literature seems to be primarily critical and analytic and interpretative: more the historian of art than the artist, the musicologist than the composer. Writers and performance artists are brought into the English Faculty by the Judith Wilson Fund, set up for this purpose, to give workshops and offer consultation; but there is a reticence in any attempt to teach creative writing (as pioneered, for example, at the University of East Anglia and as currently taught by a Caiian graduate at the University of Sussex), and no one at Cambridge will expect you to develop creative skills of your own or will give you much apparent encouragement in that direction.
5. The word 'apparent' is used advisedly, because an apparently minor and marginal feature of the two big exams within the course, Part I at the end of your second year and Part II at the end of your third, gives a small hint of another kind. This is the original composition, and from every point of view it seems an evident anomaly within the structure of the English course.
6. The Regulations specify that a candidate for either Part of the English Tripos shall be allowed to submit an original composition in English, of not more than 5,000 words (exclusive of notes). Such a composition, if of sufficient merit, shall be taken into account by the examiners, who shall have power to examine the candidate upon it *viva voce*. The submission of non-literary material shall not be allowed. (Readers may be amused to know that this last sentence was added to the rules because of a legendary Caius undergraduate who, well within my time here, submitted an epigram carved into the flank of an already overripe kipper, causing much official consternation.)

7. This provision for an original composition means that any candidate for these two examinations has the free option to submit an extra piece or pieces of his or her own written work. Within the limit of length any kind of writing in English within or relative to the field of literature is allowed and indeed welcomed. This means that creative work of a primary or secondary kind is accepted, as also critical, speculative or descriptive writing in any mode including those of orthodox undergraduate study (critical essays and the like). Creative work of a secondary kind might include translation from foreign texts, adaptations from one medium or genre into another, improvisation or imitation based on distinct original texts or sources or exercises in parody taken in its broadest sense. Creative work of a primary kind might include travel writing, scripts for performance, trials at autobiography, writing for children, experiments with typography and text-presentation quite as much as writing for the theatre, stories and parts of novels, and poetry in every form and mode.

8. An academic essay submitted as an original composition is not limited by the restrictions on subject-matter that govern dissertations or portfolio essays; any literary topic is acceptable. Thus, while a dissertation on an American author or American literary theme may not be offered for Part I (because of the restriction to Literature in English of the British Isles), an original composition of exactly the same maximum word-length may focus upon an American topic or indeed upon any aspect of any foreign literature, *and* any notes to such an essay need not be counted into the word limit. The only commonsense restriction here is that if you put in a study of village story-telling in south India there may be no examiner available to read it expertly. It would be sensible to consult your Director of Studies before planning an exotic project of this kind.

9. Translation practice is another field in which experiments may be tried which deviate from the strict requirements of exercises designed to test formal knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Translation of foreign poetic texts into English poems, taking creative risks with form and sound or finding new means to carry cultural references across into English equivalents, are ways of exploring different priorities. Putting performance writing (e.g. the French neoclassical *tirade*) into a rhetorically performable English equivalent may invite boldness as much as defensive precision; likewise the texts of European poetic modernism (e.g. Apollinaire's celebrated *Calligrammes*) will challenge all the conventions of standard translation technique. As well as including the foreign-language originals (not reckoned in the word-count) a submission which experiments with creative translation might well include a headnote or short essay explaining the motives for such work. If (say) you submit a film-script worked up from a chapter of a classic novel, and include the original text for comparison, that text too would (probably) not require to be word-counted; but if your text and the original were presented in interactive parallel format, then (perhaps) they would both need to be counted.

10. To compound the anomaly of this free option within the scheme of examinations, there is a well-established practice about its marking and the consequence that this can have for a candidate's exam results. Each original composition is examined anonymously, like all other components submitted more normally, and will be assigned a mark and thus a class by two examiners working independently; after consultation the examiners concerned will usually in each case determine an agreed mark, or there may need to be arbitration by means of a third reading. This final mark is entered into the mark book in the

usual fashion, but the status of the mark is not usual. If the mark could in certain specific ways bring credit or advantage to a candidate and assist in improving his or her result, it is counted into the decision-making process, to confer a benefit; but if the mark is not strong or even if it is decidedly weak it cannot bring any disadvantage either express or implied, but is simply set aside as of no further bearing or relevance.

11. The effect, in other words, is like snakes and ladders with no snakes; you may go up, but you cannot go down. It is thus a risk-free option, a means of claiming bonus marks outside the normal scheme. This feature gives tacit recognition to certain aspects of creative talent: that it may not relate directly to intellectual skills or diligent exam preparation, and yet that such skill with original creative uses of language is after all an extra accomplishment which does have a recognised value within the scheme of an academic course of study, and that the quality of such original composition should if good enough confer a distinct and effective benefit.

12. What is the possible benefit involved? In current practice the advantage deriving from a strong original composition is restricted to a submission which is given an agreed mark placing it in at least the upper second class. The effect which it can have relates to candidates whose overall performance before the results have been finally worked out, and excluding the original composition, places them on the borderline between one class and another. If such a candidate whose final grade is hovering between a third and a lower second, or a lower and upper second, or between an upper second and a first class, has also submitted an original composition of sufficient merit (i.e. in the upper second or first class), then if the agreed mark for the original composition lies in the higher class (or above it) the candidate in question can be raised without further discussion into the higher class. Ladders but not snakes.

13. Further recognition is also given to the symbolic part which the original composition plays within the English course and the formal recognition of excellence by means of the examination system, in the form of University prizes publicly awarded on the results of the Tripos. Regulations specify that the T.R. Henn Prize shall be awarded annually by the examiners for Part I of the English Tripos, and the Quiller-Couch Prize shall be awarded annually by the examiners for Part II of the English Tripos. Each prize shall be awarded to the candidate whose original composition, of a creative nature, is adjudged to be the most outstanding among the work submitted as original compositions in the examination for the Part concerned. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch was King Edward VII Professor of English Literature, and Tom Henn was Reader in Anglo-Irish Literature, both notable figures in the history of Cambridge English, and their names are permanently linked to this encouragement of creative talent. Note in particular that, while any kind of original writing may be submitted (historical and critical as well as creative), the prizes are reserved for creative work.

14. The rules for presentation and submission of original compositions are similar to those governing dissertations. Each composition must be typed or word-processed within the limit of length, except that notes (if any) are in this case not counted, and if translation is submitted the attachment of the original-language texts as an appendix is also deemed to be outside the word-limit. There is no requirement to give advance notice of an intention to submit an original composition, nor does your formal exam entry need to make any

mention of the matter one way or the other. Dedicated cover sheets are provided for Part I and for Part II original compositions, and your submission plus cover sheet duly completed needs to be handed in to your Director of Studies, under arrangements that will be specified well beforehand, by the second day of Full Easter Term, so that it can be formally submitted in your name by not later than 5.00 p.m. on that day. This means that the arrangements for handing in dissertations and original compositions are virtually identical.

15. A specific ruling about originality. You may not submit work as an original composition that in any shape or form has been even in part submitted previously for a University examination or a University prize; but this exclusion does not apply to prize competitions within a college context. Caius invites each year several classes of submission for Master's Essay Prizes, including the Rossetti Prize for creative work of outstanding distinction (details are published in *College Regulations*), and there is no bar to the submission in part or whole of such material as an original composition for the English Tripos. Remember, however, that within a Tripos exam as a whole you should not use substantially the same or similar material more than once, and that this restriction does include the material of an original composition.

16. As an aside from these rules and procedures it may be worth reflecting on the larger implications for creative work more generally in relation to the English course. It takes only a moment's thought to recognise that there is no worthwhile or valid distinction between creative and other forms of writing. Your weekly essays, your drafts towards portfolios and dissertations, all draw from you responses to texts and their deep complexities which must be creative if they are not to be merely mechanical, and your handling of written discourse needs to develop flair and subtlety and nuance of insight which will challenge your originality and fullest powers of expression. Reading the masters of written English provides you with examples and indirect targets for emulation; let yourself learn from good work by developing your control of English beyond the banal and formulaic chatter of casebooks and student guides and second-rate revenge tragedies.

17. There is a place for exercises of style and imitation in the learning process. You will better understand the demands of the sonnet form in its historical development if you write some of your own; just as you will more fully appreciate the problems of putting Dante's *terza rima* into English if you experiment for yourself. Johnson's paragraph construction may look merely sententious until you locate the critical leverage within its overall balance, and deliberate experimental imitation will save you from lapsing unintentionally into parody Johnsonism in your essay conclusions. Even if you believe that formal prosody is no longer an option for the modern poet, a writerly experience of form and genre from the inside can confer analytic insight and can also throw brilliant sidelight on what is given up when traditional modes are abandoned or subverted.

18. As you move in your course from period to period, and meet new genres or adaptations of previous ones, you may keep up a running exercise of such exploratory imitations; while vacations are a clearer time for new writing experiments of your own. Try not to fall into the error of never finishing anything, of casting work aside out of dissatisfaction and leaving it beyond

reach of later recovery. Even if you see too many imperfections, try to put it into the best form you can achieve before burying it in your dossier or a deep archive directory on your hard disk. Then at the point when you are actively considering possibilities for an original composition you will be able to review what there is and what might be done with it.

19. If your original composition for the Tripos is to be more in the nature of a critical essay or piece of academic work in traditional form, then all the advice concerning preparation and presentation given in 'Tips on Dissertations' applies also here. Not that traditional treatment need present only traditional material: a very persuasive analysis, including many quoted passages, might for instance be made of Shakespeare's *The Tragedie of Brutus*, or of Blake's *Songs of Revolution*. But practical advice can also be given for work in more overtly creative modes, because here too the quality of care and finish and attention to detail will surely influence the outcome.

20. First, bear in mind that, although you cannot suffer harm from a poor submission, this is no excuse for chucking in inferior work or silly or unconsidered or trivial scribblings, full of vapid egotism. Caius is a serious college and we keep up certain standards; the provision of this opportunity confers a privilege and it should be treated with due regard. Serious writers learn to judge their own performance, often severely, and to improve or discard efforts which fall short of their best. There is a place for spontaneity and last-minute creative flurry, but do not be deceived by stuff that has no lasting power, won't stand up or survive a close critical glance. It may not be straightforward to plan for a piece of original writing and then appraise it without applying the dead hand of merely academic scepticism; but pretentiousness, sentimentalism and expressive disordering (i.e. muddle dignified as experiment) will not excite your unwilling readers. Leave time to ponder what you will or may submit, and it might do no harm to seek advice or a second opinion.

21. Second, the submission does not have to be an integral unity or knit up into an interrelated whole. You may submit a batch of poems that have no internal or formal connection, or two or three stories done in quite different styles and voices, or an informal sampling in mixed kinds, e.g. a story, some poems, a piece of dramatic dialogue, an experimental defoliation of an existing text. There is no merit in mere quantity or bulk, nor in variety for its own sake; but if the whole submission takes up very few pages there will have to be some distinct fireworks if it is to make a strong impression. An examiner may wish to be assured that fourteen apparently brilliant lines are not just a happy fluke.

22. Third, the work put in does not have to be complete. Writing may be part of a larger projection, either already executed or planned for the future, and in such cases a brief headnote explaining this may be appropriate. Sometimes the writing may be intrinsically uncompleted, composed as a trial or experiment: a scene from an unwritten screen-play, chapter one of an imaginary autobiography, a poetic narrative which might or might not be finished. The word limit may constrain you to make an editorial selection; do not anyway write up to the buffers just to fill a space, but remember also that the deliberate 'fragment', with its place in the history of romanticism, may lay claim to a pathos or suspended judgement which the actual quality of execution does rather little to justify.

23. Fourth, there is a certain merit in the work that you submit being fresh

and current. Even if you have some pieces dating back to your schooldays which you believe represent a benchmark for you, leave them in your bottom drawer and concentrate on attempting new and more challenging tasks, consonant with your current stage of development. Writing is a way of moving forward: original talent finds and tests itself at the outset by not standing still or gazing backwards. Remember too that lightness and dexterity of touch, witty invention and simple modesty and truth to feeling are as much virtues as the earnestness of grander ambition.

24. In addition, be fully aware that there are formalities and conventions in presenting certain kinds of text material. The layout of dialogue in stories and dramatic speech in theatre or film scripts follows certain accepted rules; if you decide to break or modify these rules, it might be to your advantage if a reader could see that this was deliberate and that you had reasons for it. Likewise, the indentation and paragraphing and stanza sequence of verse writing are not arbitrary features, and least of all so in experiments with form. If you don't fully understand such formal matters, find out. There is no need to be fussy and self-important with formatting, but equally a lofty nonchalance may prompt a corresponding sangfroid in your reader.

25. Other forms of good behaviour include correct quotation (unless you are manipulating your quoted originals), spelling and grammar that deviate from convention only when you want them to, and a certain due caution about adopting pieces of existing text by other authors too largely into your own: the word 'original' does imply an aspect of warranty that the writing is your own work unless duly acknowledged.

26. Regarding the examination process itself, you may believe that university examiners crouched over their desks with red pencils poised in disapproval are not the best readers of vulnerable new work which you are not sure about yourself. But it is worth emphasising that examiners look forward to original compositions, and enjoy reading them with an open mind and in the knowledge that future writers of real distinction may be making an initial debut in this rather unlikely context. Indeed, over the history of English studies at Cambridge many now highly regarded poets and novelists and playwrights took up the challenge of an original composition, were encouraged by its tacit acknowledgement of creative effort, and went on to write books which now form part of the present and future English course.

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1st August 2000