

TIPS ON PART I PORTFOLIOS OF ESSAYS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. What follows are some introductory notes on portfolios, specifically intended for undergraduates at Caius about to start into their second year and thus new to this project. In brief, the portfolio of essays is an option within the examination for Part I of the English Tripos, which allows an intending candidate for the examination to choose to submit a dossier of three essays, written in the candidate's own time and submitted by a deadline ahead of the examination, which will represent work for one of the papers 2, 3 or 4 and thus serve as an alternative to sitting the paper for which the essays are substituted; thereby allowing the candidate to sit one less paper during the actual examination.
2. The regulations governing this option specify the deadline for submission, the maximum length of essays, the theme or subject of at least one of the essays, and the conditions governing the substitution of a portfolio for an examination paper. The rules are set out in Regulations for Part I of the English Tripos, issued in updated form every year by the English Faculty, and fuller background is provided in 'Notes for Guidance on Portfolios of Essays in the English Tripos', also issued annually by the Faculty. The notes and suggestions which follow in this Caius memorandum are meant to be complementary to all that is contained in the Faculty counterparts; if you are puzzled at any point about the contents of these documents, or about apparent divergences between them, consult your Director of Studies for clarification.
3. First a word concerning the portfolio option within the larger scheme of Part I and its options overall. Whatever scheme of papers you decide to enter for, you are allowed to substitute a dissertation *or* a portfolio, *or* both, *or* neither, for any one (or two) of papers 2-4. This means that you may offer a dissertation but *not* a portfolio, or a portfolio but *not* a dissertation; if you offer both they must be substituted for different papers from among papers 2-4; or you may decide to sit all three exam papers and not to offer either a dissertation or a portfolio.
4. Before you consider your individual choice from amongst these permutations, you will need to know more specifically about the portfolio option. It is essentially a form of work prepared and submitted for examination purposes, and this determines all the rules and all the features which comprise its character. If you decide to submit a portfolio you are contracted to produce three essays which are essentially in origin weekly supervision essays arising out of your work for the paper in question, tackling a project from within your sequence of assignments and devised not as a piece of scholarship or research but as part of your reading of texts and argument or discussion about context and interpretation and literary judgement. These essays are thus intended to retain all the qualities of their first appearance: trial encounters, first thoughts, unverified contentions and enthusiasms or adverse assessments.
5. However, your preparation of such raw essays for inclusion into a portfolio is intended to provide opportunity for the original working to be improved. First, you will have submitted the essay to your supervisor and there will have been a discussion, possibly detailed and supported by annotation in

your margins. Second, you will have completed other reading and essay assignments within the period, providing a wider context for review and connection. Third, you will have had an interval for reflection and re-reading, both of the primary texts and of your essay and notes. And fourth, your supervisor will be able to advise you which of your essays might go well in a portfolio, and will offer some guidance about useful revision which you might make to the essays which you select.

6. At this point we enter upon grand strategy and a battery of connected choices and decisions. This will sound much more complex than in fact it will turn out to be in practice. Think logically and realistically, and think for yourself since each individual case comes out differently. When you have a good initial overall idea of the issues, that is the time for a first talk with your director of studies; there may need to be at least one more such talk before the way ahead is clear.

7. The first question is, who should decide to take up the portfolio option, and how should it be balanced against the possibility of offering a dissertation? Over recent years it has become fairly general for most Part I candidates to offer both options; the portfolio makes sense because it diminishes the stress and workload of preparing for the written paper, it stages out the labour of preparation, and it enables you to use and take stock of the benefit previously obtained from writing an original essay and then discussing the work with your original supervisor. The word-limit is rather tight for a developed argument with plenty of alert quotation; but regard the pressure to condense as a challenge to concision and economy.

8. Next, if you do come down in favour of a portfolio, you will need to consider for which paper it should in your case be substituted. If you are also going towards the dissertation option as well, the choice of which own-time option to substitute for which paper becomes a moderately complex one. In reviewing the double question it is sensible to give your dissertation choice the lead position, and to decide that issue first in accord with the criteria suggested in 'Tips on Producing Dissertations'. This will leave two papers from which to select the one in replacement for which you will make up a portfolio.

9. The major consideration here is, in which period do you have the best and fullest clutch of weekly essays, from which to work up a bright, well-balanced set for the portfolio? (In thinking about this, bear in mind the points about a Topic essay, set out below.) However, there may be at least one of papers 2-4 for which you have not yet completed all your weekly essay assignments; and also there may be other aspects: in which period do you feel least securely in command of a width of material, and in which, when you come to be examined, do you least want to be at risk from the way in which the question-paper is set? In reviewing the single option, i.e., portfolio without dissertation (or, indeed, *vice versa*), the issues are simpler but will follow the same general pattern as above.

10. When you have thought these questions through in your own case, you may want to ask your original supervisor for any or each of the periods in question, whether they think you have promising material for a portfolio in the area of the examination paper for which he or she supervised you; in some cases you might resubmit all your essays for a rapid review and for suggestions about tactics, before you decide. But the final decision, in case of a single or double replacement, will need to be discussed with your director of studies, and

you will need to have reached firm conclusions by not much later than the division of the Michaelmas Term in your second (i.e., Part I) year.

11. If you do opt for the portfolio, and when you have decided which paper it shall replace, all the above considerations will enable you to set yourself the task of choosing your three brightest and appropriately diverse essays and revising their first-draft form. Typically you should be able to improve and tighten the structure, sharpen and clarify your argument, verify and check the quotations and the information which you use, and bring all into a controlled span of development within the limit of length. Be wary that you allow good time for this process of polishing and improvement, because what is involved is not just smartening up the presentation but re-thinking your critical position, your analysis and your response to the subject texts, as well as grappling with the larger critical or historical problems that may underlie the assignment. You will not be able to make your original essays much longer, indeed you may have to tighten and condense them; but you will be able to make them stronger and deeper and more challenging, ending with essays which will allow a reader to see your critical intelligence and taste and accuracy of treatment, as well as your distinctive natural energy and liveliness, in the best possible light. Time and effort need to be set aside for this.

12. The rules require that portfolio essays must be on subjects of literary interest, in the widest sense, which fall within the scope of the paper for which they are substituted. The essays should demonstrate a good variety and substance and range within the scope of the paper, and a good range of connecting knowledge and reading in the period as a whole. Each essay must be not less than 1500 and not more than 2000 words in length, inclusive of notes if any. You are not required to add a bibliography to your essays, but you should acknowledge the source of quotations and any substantial reference to other texts and discussions. Remember that an essay gains point and direction by having a title or essay-question to which it is addressed: set this title or question at the head of the essay and bear it steadily in mind as you work towards your conclusion.

13. Each portfolio essay must be typed or word-processed, strictly within the word limits, and each page must carry a page word-count as well as a running total (as also for dissertations). Do not start one essay on the same page as the conclusion of the previous one: regard each essay as a separate entity, separately paginated, with its title or question to be answered at the head of the first page and its final word-count at the foot of the last. Take care also that you do not even indirectly reveal either your personal identity or gender or your College of origin, since the marking process is conducted with strict anonymity. The ensemble of the three essays, together with official cover sheet duly completed, must be ready for handing in for transmission to the English Faculty Office by not later than 5.00 p.m. on the final Thursday of Full Lent Term. Submission by this deadline is an obligatory and formal requirement, which may not be extended save in dire (usually medical) emergencies; failures of printers or word-processing equipment will not be accepted as grounds for transgression.

14. At least one of the portfolio essays must be addressed to one of the Specified Topics for the paper in question. The Regulations for Part I of the English Tripos and also the Faculty Reading Lists for each of papers 2, 3 and 4

provide information concerning the current Specified Topics for the year in question, and give lists of selected reading in primary texts and secondary background. During your supervision for the paper in question you will have tackled one of these Topics, and your portfolio Topic essay is likely to arise from this. The essay which you submit is not obliged to refer to any of the texts included in the Topic reading list, but in ranging over some substantial aspect of the Topic in a portfolio essay it would be surprising if at least some of the reading list texts were not brought into discussion. Try to keep the main interests of your Topic essay from making more than marginal appearance in either of your other portfolio essays.

15. Remember in connection with a Topic essay that you are not being invited to make passive parade of basic information or background, with all the truisms of summary and overview and none of the energy of first-hand analysis or critical enquiry. The underlying mode may well be cultural or intellectual history; but the texts are part of literary study, and you will get nowhere if you dutifully list themes and dates and do not connect with specific features of texts and their distinctively individual qualities and interests. It is a well-known characteristic of intellectual history that only second-rate texts are typical and characteristic of their age or school; major writers use their themes but are not used by them, and your task is to find an entry into the topic in question that allows you to explore such paradoxes closely and actively. Read over your draft topic essay with alert scepticism; if it seems on the dull side, padded out with merely illustrative quotation, it will not score well.

16. Your two main literary essays selected for your portfolio will no doubt have started life as weekly essays for a supervisor. But either or both may need and benefit strongly from a good deal more than stylistic polishing. Some original essays may have been effective but unbalanced, wobbling off the point or indeed missing several points of importance. Some may have started off bland and directionless but then have come up with a good idea, switching directions to capitalise upon it. Some may have had no real idea at all but instead have been conducting a sensible entry-level review of texts and problems. Some may indeed have had an active idea but also have been full of undigested opinions and fanciful alarms, perhaps in part responding to the supervision of the previous week. Some may have had a badly shaky start, followed by a good recovery; some may have begun well but then rather tailed off, without a well-conducted conclusion because time ran out. In all such cases some major reconstruction will be required.

17. Indeed, in some cases it may be more economical and productive to start a new replacement essay rather than to mend up an old one, giving yourself time to shew this new draft to your supervisor and then to revise and improve it accordingly. Remember that if the original essay-question or title now strikes you as naive or banal or lacking point, you should sharpen it up so as to challenge yourself to more active discussion; likewise, pompous or grandiose or fanciful titles need recasting if they are not to infect the essays which follow on from them. Whether you are improving an earlier essay or constructing a new one, remember that you surely must go back to the texts and steep yourself in them and work your arguments from direct reading and analysis, rather than from older notes or a second-hand memory of reading no longer fresh in mind. You may find, too, on revisiting older treatments, that your critical viewpoint has shifted; in such cases don't try to graft new conclusions on to previous

discussion, but take time to rework the whole essay into a coherent new format. Otherwise your revised essays will be superficially improved but at heart stale or confused, because you only tinkered with them.

18. It is also worth giving a little thought to the ensemble of the portfolio as a whole. It is sensible to give each essay a shape and substance which allows it to stand independently, on its own feet. At the same time you may be able to demonstrate a balance or range of interests by your choice of subjects, tackling drama and fiction as well as poetry, reaching across the span of the period, bringing in large ideas at one stage and counterbalancing this by close textual analysis at another. Your Topic essay should not overlap in any major way with your other essays, but here again try to gear up your Topic essay so that it works actively into the balance of the ensemble, rather than seeming a flat, add-on component. A good portfolio should read as a whole like intelligent work-in-progress, full of ideas and projects and critical energies, maybe not yet fully assimilated or resolved but with good information and plenty of active insights; all presented neatly and clearly, with good sequence and shape, and on its best behaviour in accuracy of detail and correctness of style.

19. Your principal supervisor for the portfolio essays, both in their original form and in the process of revision and improvement, will be your original supervisor for the paper in question, although there may also be an arrangement for you to receive guidance about organising the ensemble of your essays and their presentation as a whole. Assistance with work on these essays will by custom not extend to the final drafts, which should be entirely your own productions. If you run into problems or get into a tangle, get in touch with your Director of Studies promptly.

20. Timing of the work on portfolios will depend in part on the stage at which the original course of supervisions for the paper was completed. At the end of your first year before you go down for the summer vacation you will be asked about your plans for Part I options: dissertation, portfolio, etc. By the start of the following Michaelmas Term you should know what you intend, so that a sequence of work can be planned out. The submission deadlines for portfolios and for dissertations have been staggered, so that the critical final stages of work for one shall not overlap with the same for the other. But don't be slow to get started on portfolio essays because they seem a limited exercise, or you will soon be in difficulties.

21. It is extremely important to get through all the strategic worries and plans and choices promptly, well before you depart for the Christmas break, so that you can know which essays are to be produced and how much extra work will (probably) be required for each of them. It is prudent also to have word-processed the texts before the new year, so that you can take stock of how they look in the cold light of print, and can word-count each one and measure up for length, and have a list of titles and quotations for checking. If you are not quite sure of the sequence of argument in any one of them, try making a retrospective essay-plan; if there are spinal fractures buried under improvised splints, this manoeuvre may x-ray them all too plainly. At this stage also, draw up an order of projects: which essay to take first, and so on. Nibbling at all three of them simultaneously will just blunt your stamina.

22. If you can get a good head start, along these lines, the work outstanding for revision, recasting and possible re-writing can be spaced into the weeks of

the Lent Term preceding the deadline for submission, verifying your print-formats, checking spelling and grammar and quotations as more fully described in 'Tips on Producing Dissertations', which should be consulted together with 'Tips on Presentation of Essays' for advice on technicalities. Keep alert: write well. Be sure that you do not neglect the distinctions between titles in single quotation marks and titles underlined or in italics, and be sure likewise that you don't make silly last-minute mistakes over quotations, foreign accents, correct reference to works quoted, and the like. Bad manners certainly do make bad impressions.

23. The question of timing requires the making of a careful plan overall, especially if a dissertation is also to be submitted; and if you simply lurch into a last-minute rush after fitful worrying beforehand, you will also spoil your regular supervision work for much of the Lent Term. Make a clear schedule for all your various commitments: allow some flexibility but try to keep to your allocations of time, and try not to leave important aspects until close to the final deadline. As you set up your drafts and revisions in files readied for printing, be sure to make frequent backups as a precaution against accident. And do remember not to overwork your original bright ideas so that they become dulled and defensive in preparation for their fate inside a portfolio. A good portfolio essay should have verve and character and maybe a streak or two of waywardness as well as acumen and judgement; its style can be more relaxed than that of a dissertation, just so long as it is clear and accurate and well-conducted.

24. Finally, remember that even though a portfolio may seem a less grand and taxing project than a dissertation, they both carry equal marks in the examination process, and it is a false economy to skimp on the former in order to allow a grander opportunity for the latter. Writing up a good portfolio essay can be very satisfying, because second thoughts can so much enrich and strengthen your original first effort.

J.H. Prynne
Director of Studies in English

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