

READING ENGLISH AT CAIUS

Studying English literature for the three years leading to a B.A. degree at Cambridge University is called 'reading English'; Gonville and Caius College is one of the colleges of the university that accepts entrants to follow this course, and its full name is often shortened to 'Caius'. This note gives some background about reading English at Caius, for the benefit of those thinking about following a degree course at a university and considering their options.

Students at Cambridge are called 'undergraduates', and all undergraduates become members of the university by being admitted to one of the colleges. The undergraduate course in English studies is organised by the English department, which is called 'the Faculty of English', but undergraduates are directed through the stages of their work within the college of which they are members.

The English course extends over three years and is divided into two Parts. The first part runs for two years and spans the major development of English literary writing from the medieval period to the present day, including some language study (English and foreign) and some practice in critical method; the second part runs over the final year and broadens its range to include, as options, many aspects of foreign literature and many topics or areas of study of wider interest than the exclusively literary. There are options in, for example, early pre-medieval literature; in drama and performance; in project work chosen and set up by the individual undergraduate; and in a range of special topics running right up to the present day. There are courses of lectures which undergraduates attend, provided by the Faculty, and individual teaching sessions (called 'supervisions') which are arranged by the college. Fuller details of the course are readily available but are probably not needed at this stage.

Caius admits each year about ten new undergraduates to read English, by rather stiff competition which is designed to select those who will most benefit from the course and do it well. The method of application and selection is explained in the current edition of the *Cambridge Admissions Prospectus*, which may be obtained free of charge by writing to the Admissions Office at Caius; many schools will also have a copy. Sixth-formers and others at school or college who are pondering whether to try for Cambridge and whether to apply for English and which college to select as their first choice should first consult this booklet. There is also an Admissions Prospectus for Caius, which will be sent cost-free to anyone asking for it, which gives details of Open Days for potential applicants and other useful information; and also a college website from which information can be downloaded. Open Days in particular are a useful way of finding out more about the College and the course which you might wish to follow.

As with most Cambridge colleges we consider most candidate applications in the year after GCSE and before A level, and to successful candidates we assign a conditional offer which depends for confirmation upon achieving three specified minimum grades at A-2 level: usually A (English)

plus A plus B, or maybe even three A's. We are also ready in certain circumstances to consider applicants who have already taken their A-2 level examinations; the Caius Admissions Office will answer queries about this or any other technical details of application methods. There is no formal requirement about which A level subjects should have been taken as a qualification to read English at Caius, except that English Literature or English Language and Literature should be one of them; it is also useful if candidates have studied a foreign language (ancient or modern) to at least GCSE level. With regard to subjects taken at AS level we do not yet have a settled policy about these, since arrangements about them seem to be changing all the time; but we shall review each case on its merits, and those who have AS level qualifications will gain benefit from them.

At this College we welcome applications from all kinds of school and we believe that, in the matter of individual development, no one kind of school or school background or ethnic origin has an inbuilt advantage over any other; likewise we welcome both men and women applicants and will also consider well-motivated mature students upon an equal footing with those of more usual school-leaving age. A distinctive feature of arrangements for applying to read English at Caius is that all applicants are asked to send up, in the period before they come here for interview in early December, three short pieces of current school-work: an essay on a topic in Shakespeare; a piece of practical criticism or literary analysis of a passage of text; and a third essay on any literary topic. These essays need not be especially formal or polished up, and they do not need to be word-processed. Normal hand-written homework essays done as part of A level course-work are very acceptable, and will give us some impression of your current skills and interests.

So: what are the requirements for an applicant to read English at Caius? What is the distinctive character of the English course here, in general terms and without going into detail? What kind of applicant will it suit, and what kind of applicant stands a reasonable chance of success in making an application?

It has to be said that reading English is a demanding course of study, and a mere taste for recreational reading is probably not sufficient motive for it. An undergraduate who follows this course needs to have an active intelligence, good intellectual powers of analysis and understanding, a well-developed imagination, and a distinct appetite for reading poetry and plays and novels with a view to exploring their powers and complexities. Intelligence is required to develop an extended context for study, including the historical development of the modes of literary imagination and expression through the course of English history and in the wider world of other cultures. Writing, reading, interpreting and understanding all have their own histories, within the framework of social practice as this changes and develops over the centuries running up to the present day. Aptitudes for analysis are required to explore the structure of complex writing and to develop critical insights and judgements about individual works and also by comparison over a larger range. Lively energies of imagination are needed in order that the conventions of literary art can come alive in the mind and mobilise the reader's understanding of powerful expression and responsiveness to it.

All of the above takes on a specialised character by virtue of being

concerned principally with special kinds of language and language use. An undergraduate following an English course needs to have, and to develop, a strongly focussed awareness of literary language, how it works and what it does, over the history of the changing forms of English literary usage and creative innovation. It is possible to be interested in ideas and arguments, or in performance and experiment, without this focussed interest in language; but without such an interest much of the distinctive value of the Cambridge English course as it is followed at Caius would be lost. When Hamlet says, for example, 'Now might I do it pat', was 'pat' a colloquialism and why did he use it? When Webster has his Duchess say, 'I am Duchess of Malfi still', what was and is the force of 'still'? When Milton says 'Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new', why were the woods to be 'fresh'?

Undergraduates reading English at Caius also need to develop skills for writing confidently and clearly in handling the development of argument and explanation, and for writing with lively and distinct directness in expression of their own tastes and judgements. They need to have an appetite for focussed expression and exchange of opinion, in exploring different points of view through discussion. Since critical judgements and preferences vary between individuals, and also across the sequence of historical time, working out one's own judgements is a complex skill that requires energy and practice: skill at attending closely to the judgements of others in the course of developing one's own reasoned estimates. Why is Charles Dickens a more serious novelist than many of his contemporary readers thought, and why is Bernard Shaw now frequently neglected? Writing poems or plays of your own or starting a novel may be good ways of experimenting with language, as also keeping a speculative journal. If you have no appetite for all this, then maybe Electrical Engineering could be a more sensible course to choose.

The development of a fully rounded sense of personal values and a grasp of strong guiding insights is a matter of distinct individual variation; there is no one single way of reading English or one preferred kind of conclusion or outcome to three years of study here. But there is for sure a lot of reading involved, and Caius supports this work by an active team of teaching Fellows and a rather excellent Library. There is much choice provided within the structure of the course over its two parts, and every undergraduate following this course strongly will develop a personal emphasis and style. Considerable stamina is also needed, in fully responding to the increasing opportunities spreading outwards through the duration of the course; it takes intellectual perseverance and continuing readiness to experiment and explore, to keep up a full response to the pressures of challenge and opportunity. All this sounds like hard work, and it is; worth undertaking only if you have the right aptitudes and strongly want to do it.

The Director of Studies in English or one of the Teaching Fellows is always ready, in addition to the arrangements for Open Days already mentioned, to talk to a possible applicant who wants to ask questions or weigh up the perils and advantages of an application to Caius, or to a teacher who is giving advice about these questions. A letter or telephone call to the Admissions Office is all that is required to set this up. English Studies at Caius are currently directed by the signatory of this note, but from autumn 2003 onwards will be directed by Dr C.J. Burrow, University Lecturer in

English and an established long-time member of the Caius English teaching team. There is further background information available from the Caius website: go to <http://www.cai.cam.ac.uk>, click on student life, then on study, then on English.

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Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge,
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