

TIPS ON READING LISTS, 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. They may usefully be read in conjunction with Tips on Books and Libraries, and Tips on Reading. Since books and journals are fundamental tools of the trade for students of the humanities, now is the time to begin to think more professionally about them and their uses. Remember also that supervisors and library staff are expert about books and are always willing to discuss queries, practical or abstruse. But as part of the structure of a degree course, academic guidance about appropriate (and, sometimes, required) reading and study is provided at different levels and different stages of your work by means of reading lists.

2. It is important that you should soon understand how these lists of books and articles, and sometimes also of websites and other electronic data, can work to assist you. Most lists that are supplied from the Faculty of English, or from the English Faculty Library, or from a lecturer by distribution to those attending a series of lectures or classes or seminars, will indicate who compiled the list in question, the date of its most recent revision, and the purpose and/or level for which it is intended. Some Faculty lists give details of required (i.e., mandatory) reading for a named paper in the Tripos Examination, with prescribed works or parts of works ('set books') nominated for detailed study. Remember that these requirements do alter from year to year, and so it is important not to be working from out-dated lists. Some lists will nominate specified text materials for preparatory study in advance of a session designed to explore and discuss these materials collectively, as in a class or seminar. Increasingly also, students may be advised that reading lists are made available via specified internet websites, from which you may download them into your own computing setup (laptop, etc) and thence print them out as you may require.

3. It is important, too, that you should understand how a booklist may be laid out, under headings and in sections, ideally giving a full if brief bibliographical description of each item in such form as to make it easy to trace in a library or bookshop. Sometimes alternative editions of recommended works may be listed; sometime priorities may be indicated, perhaps by supplying asterisks to the most necessary and indispensable works, or by marking introductory studies as to be read before other more advanced treatments. Some lists will include brief commentary or annotation on certain shared themes or on the usefulness of individual items. Study the layout of any list that you intend to make use of, and the general information provided at the start or end of the list, so that you can determine how it may contribute to your own personal needs. Many synoptic lists on big topics are impossibly long; keep in mind that you are not expected to read everything (which would be uncritical), and an extended list offers you a basis for making your own choices.

4. Lists provided by your Director of Studies or your current supervisor may have a specific application to study projects that form the basis of your weekly work in college, and which for example may be set up so as to culminate in your production of a piece of written work ('weekly essay') to be handed in by a specified deadline. A tight schedule may make it important for you to get working at a reading list quickly, to make full use of your time. Other lists also provided within college may be more long-term, perhaps indicating recommended reading for a vacation ahead; remember in this case that you may need to locate and borrow books for vacation study before you leave Cambridge bound for some deep rural isolation, much conducive to thoughtful reading but not well supplied with handy stores of books and publications.

5. Be aware that in many areas of personal study an apparently attractive resource is provided by the internet. Advantages here are that most web-based materials are free of charge and can be retrieved speedily via any simple laptop with a modem or net link. Disadvantages are the generally low-level of informational quality in many websites, the proliferation of inaccurate, outdated and derivative materials, and the almost complete lack of focussed purposeful selection in what is on offer. These disadvantages underline the special privilege of access to intelligently compiled reading-list guides: they incorporate the judgemental preferences of well-informed scholars and teachers who know their fields and who offer to share this expert knowledge with you as a relatively beginning reader.

6. Very few booklists that will be supplied to you will aim at anything like inclusiveness. They will be selective, and you need to grasp the principles of such selection, both explicit and implied. First, there is likely to be emphasis on editions and studies that the compiler considers intelligent and offering reliable text-materials, or well-presented historical information, or alert critical insights: this is selection on the basis of perceived quality. Second, there will likely be preference overall for recent and up-to-date treatments; not because older materials fall short of modern approaches (often far from it, since quite frequently a modern trend-setting study carries only the whims of fashion as its pedigree), but because the implied frame of argument for more modern discussion sometimes carries information in itself which can give valid shape and guidance to your own intellectual development, as well as supplying challenges to your personal taste. Third, some booklists will be more or less sharply selective on the basis of some special interest or approach, which may mean that these are not 'balanced' in some more overall sense because they were never intended to be so. You will be in danger of being misled if you do not size up this aspect in such cases: if in a quandary, consult your current supervisor.

7. Some highly valuable booklists can be found in the 'recommendations for further reading' or the appended bibliographies to published books and monographs; usually (but not always) these are highly accurate sources of information, but sometimes they are not geared to the needs of students. Often this is indeed part of their advantage, because many textbook compilations intended specifically for students will include unambitiously simplified suggestions for reading, which a thoughtful advanced student will have good cause to consider insulting and quite well worthy to be ignored. A

more technical source of specialised materials, often of particular use when dissertations are being researched and prepared, are the notes and cited references to articles in journals; to discover such resources you may here also need expert guidance from a director of studies or supervisor, and don't be reluctant to ask.

8. As you collect various kinds of reading lists in course of your studies, perhaps annotated with library location call-marks or with attached notes taken from actual reading and study, be sure to organise these materials carefully and keep them safe and within easy reach of consultation; otherwise you may come to realise how precious such information can be only through unexpectedly losing some irreplaceable list just when it is most needed. But stay alertly sceptical also towards the air of confidence and authority that a neat, well-planned reading list may seem to exhale, in its judgement of fitness for purpose in text editions and of good critical intelligence in secondary material; the best judge of what assists you to strengthen your own judgement will soon be you yourself rather than other lofty instructors and opinionators.

9. Part of the project of extended study is that you make your own map of materials and resources important to you, across a range of interests and with different motives in mind. What you may not have time to follow up now you may well have good cause or earnest desire to revisit later on. Don't skimp on keeping your personal archive accurate and up-to-date; if it's on a hard disk, remember to back it up carefully so that you don't lose it in some electrical storm or fit of inadvertent over-tidiness. If you have other well-developed individual interests (plant-breeding or Mongolian dialects, say), transfer to these also your habits of collecting and preserving good data, because remembering that you once knew where to look for something but now can't quite recall how to find it is a frustration that good information-housekeeping can do much to diminish. Don't delete or throw out aids to study that look currently beside the point, because that very point may come around sooner or later. The humble booklist may be just what's needed to get you out of a tight corner, or into one.

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