

TIPS ON SUPERVISIONS, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, as an introduction to what in most cases will be an unfamiliar kind of teaching situation; as the supervision will rapidly become a central and pivotal element in your course, there is reason to review some of its main features. The 'supervision' is the name given at Cambridge to a session of intensive small-group teaching and discussion, between a 'supervisor' and group of undergraduates, normally between one and three in number. The arrangement is distinct from a class or seminar, and quite different from a lecture. In certain other universities a 'tutorial' may somewhat resemble the Cambridge college supervision, but regular teaching at this intimate scale is not usual elsewhere.

2. For each element at each stage of the course an undergraduate will be assigned to a supervisor, usually for a run of sessions once per week throughout the term in question; the sessions characteristically last for one hour and are held in a college room. If you are paired off for this purpose, or put into a group of three, these groupings are likely not to be permanent but simply to be convenient for the sessions during that particular term. For the most part the groups will consist of undergraduates from your own college; though later on in the course there may be some cross-mixing as well. Almost invariably all of you will be from the same year-group, and for the most part at the stage of preparing for the same paper in the examinations ahead.

3. All extended courses of supervision are arranged and monitored by colleges, and not by the Faculty; indeed, this is the colleges' central teaching role. Supervisors are appointed and assigned by your director of studies, in accordance with your specific needs, the timetable adopted and the particular skills of the supervisor. It is usual that you will learn about assignment of supervisors at the start of each term for the term ahead, but sometimes there will be arrangements in advance, and perhaps an earlier first meeting, so that you can be launched into appropriate preparatory reading and study. During any one term you may be following two or even three separate courses of supervision, each with its own supervisor and field of study, so that careful organisation of work will be required. In some cases you may have the opportunity to plan quite far ahead for some of your supervisions, which will enable you to estimate and balance your commitments.

4. Try not to come in for a session directly after a lecture or after some bout of hectic exercise, or you will be distracted; likewise, avoid very late-night parties the day before. Turn off your pager, mobile phone etc., before you start. Have some paper and pen or pencil to hand. It is general practice that you should not have more than one supervision on the same day, and indeed if you are writing an essay for your next supervision, the evening before it is due to be handed in must also be kept clear for working it to completion. Your supervision commitments will thus usually determine the central shape and rhythm of your working week. Write them into your diary well in advance, because once they are fixed up it will be very inconvenient to shift

them around. Remember too that if you pace yourself sensibly you will not slow down too much as term rushes towards its conclusion, so that your final supervision in the eighth week will find you still up and running and making sense.

5. Your supervisor may be a fellow of your own or another college, or perhaps a research student with special knowledge of your area of study. A feature of Cambridge is that no distinction is made between the rank or seniority of supervisors; you may find yourself with a senior professor or a humble newcomer, but such differences carry no significance in themselves and indeed the enthusiasm of the newcomer is sometimes a close match for the experience of the old lag. For the most part you are likely to be with supervisors from within Caius for the earlier stages of your course, and then to branch out later on into new and unfamiliar territories. Different supervisors have different styles of conducting their teaching sessions, and you will need to tune into these so as to get the best advantage out of each.

6. The aim of a course of supervisions is usually defined in relation to a specific paper or option within Part I or Part II of the English Tripos course: to equip you with knowledge and skills relevant to this component so that you will be well prepared for what you have to do. But a larger aim is to assist you to develop your aptitudes more generally: your skills of analysis, your powers of controlled reasoning and argument, your ability to write cogently and fluently; finally your overall taste and judgement. The direction taken by your own series of assigned tasks and subsequent discussion may vary in part from that taken in other groups, following your distinct needs and interests; this is one of the special advantages of tailor-made small groups. Indeed, at certain points you may be offered a choice of topics, to select one according to your own personal preference.

7. A general pattern is that the first meeting will include making a general plan for the series, advising you on initial and background reading and mapping out at least the first few sessions in terms of topic assignments and texts to be studied. You will get specific advice on which editions to prefer and on priorities in relation to secondary reading. You will never be able to squeeze in all the reading mentioned, so that you will need to estimate relative priorities within the limits of the possible. Thereafter, for each session an essay question or topic will be assigned for the week ahead, so that after reading and study in preparation each of you will be able to develop your arguments and write them out (the 'weekly essay') as the foundation for the supervision next in line. Your supervisor will let you know what kind of essay he or she would like to have, and will set a deadline for its delivery; it is important to keep to these deadlines unless for good reason (e.g. illness), just as it is important to turn up promptly at the appointed time. If for any reason you are prevented from meeting your obligations, it is a minimal courtesy to communicate your apologies in advance, and not to leave a supervisor in the lurch.

8. Your supervisor will read and probably annotate or comment on the essays for the imminent session, so as to be ready for you. Then follows the sequence of the supervision proper, which will vary as between the nature of the assignment, the stage of development of your work, and the interaction of

all temperaments involved (the 'chemistry' as it is sometimes called); but a general pattern is for a general brief introduction in which you may be asked how you got on, or some overview of the topic or its place in the sequence may be sketched out; then each essay will be reviewed and commented on, sometimes in close detail, both in regard to points contributing to general discussion of the topic and also in regard to your construction of argument and interpretation, your successful features and your weaknesses.

9. Remember that your supervisor will try to read your essay initially from within your own frame of knowledge and opinion, to follow it from your viewpoint and trace out its internal logic, before setting it in context within the wider arguments; there is not going to be any one 'correct' solution, although faulty knowledge or reasoning can certainly result in a treatment that won't really stand up. This review stage within the course of the supervision will gradually enlarge into discussion of the span of the topic more generally, or consideration of the text in context and from various viewpoints, culminating in drawing of provisional conclusions and making certain large critical appraisals in the framework of the course of your meetings as they have so far evolved. There may be especially lively and venturesome discussion at this stage, before the session is rounded off by assignment of a topic and reading lists for the next week.

10. As the above sketch will indicate, a supervision needs careful and thorough preparation because it will move fast and cover many aspects. It is essentially an occasion for active participation, for each person present to keep alert and follow the threads as they weave in and out. Be sure to speak up and play your part, even if you are uncertain of your views or how best to express them, because the atmosphere is informal and supportive, and you need to experiment in order to gain confidence and practice in the skills of discussion, of reacting to new ideas and forming new ideas of your own. It will mostly be helpful to take with you a copy of the principal text under discussion, perhaps with markers indicating passages which you may want to refer to in the course of presenting your side of things.

11. Sometimes you will be asked direct questions, or general queries will be thrown into the air; sometimes a debate may develop between you and your partner or partners, with the supervisor interjecting points or reining back the wilder flurries; sometimes there may be a good deal of explanation or analysis provided by the supervisor, based on what seems needful in the light of your essays. But a good general rule is, keep thinking actively, play your part in the discussion, and don't hang back out of shyness or deference. Supervisions can be challenging and sometimes may leave you exhausted; but they ought to be stimulating too, and provide their own moments of elation and surprise.

12. Not all supervisions conform to the type based on a previously written essay. In some cases there will be an exercise to prepare beforehand for exploratory discussion during the supervision, without any written work being asked for: sessions devoted to critical analysis of specific passages of text ('practical criticism') are often of this kind. But be sure to recognise that the required preparation may often need to be strenuous and quite time-consuming. You will need to read closely and carefully the nominated text

passage or passages, several times; if the date or period of origin is not given you may need to estimate this, so that when you run some difficult words and expressions through the *OED* you will be aware of the historical area in which the citations there given may be relevant. You will need to work out the plain sense as far as you can, trace the allusions, and examine the style and underlying purposes to which it is put, in the context of the historical development from which it comes. If the passage is presented without indication of the kind or genre of literary work from which it is taken, you will need to look for cues which will clarify that aspect; but you will usually be told whether the passage is an excerpt from a longer work or complete in itself. In all of these explorations make careful notes so that, when the discussion begins, you will be ready with plenty of material already worked out.

13. With good preparation in this way, the session can move fast and can reach interesting questions of critical judgement and comparison and evaluation while there is time for these to be probed and tested from all sides. If you have not adequately completed the basic analysis beforehand, then such lack of preparation will be tiresomely obvious and will slow everything down, while basic features are clarified and formal aspects like metre and prosody or presentation of dialogue are explained. If there are important words which you don't fully understand and have not explored for yourself, then detours will have to be made for these, too. But of course there will always be some aspects which do not come into focus until the discussion itself reveals their importance, so that a session of this kind involves finding out and extending interpretation by running debate. From time to time you may be presented with text passages for analysis which you have not previously seen, and here the task is to work out your very first moves as part of the process of discussion.

14. A few words about debate and discussion. The mode may be relatively informal, but you are in the business of the rational exchange of arguments. This means that you need to listen closely and accurately to what is said, work out your own view of the current question, and interject your own comments. You need to be able to justify and support your reasoning, to qualify and extend a point of view, to concede a point or even maybe change your mind at certain moments. The general tendency is co-operative, each point or comment coming in to channel the discussion forward, and here the chief enemy is running off the rails into irrelevance, grasping at issues which have little or no organic relation to the matter in hand. Be economical in how you contribute, and don't take more than your turn; try not to interrupt, or to get unduly excited. If your supervisor is nudging the discussion along in a certain direction it is usually best to accept tacit guidance of this kind, so that there can be a balance of coverage and time left for what still needs to be done.

15. There is however no special premium on agreement, especially when the issues are controversial and open to different points of view. Disagreements can be local, over points of interpretation or in certain shadings of judgement; or they can be large and occasionally fundamental. Because we are a society based on rational toleration as well as on passionate conviction, it is important to remain courteous and open-minded, to weigh up alternatives and not to fly into assertions at any provocation. But equally, don't muffle

your own judgements out of mere politeness or in belief that your supervisor must be infinitely wise; be ready to debate, tenaciously upon occasion, since you are at school no longer and are expected to have increasingly confident views of your own.

16. Remember in this context that undergraduates sharing the same supervision should extend discreet consideration to each other. If one of you is more shy or less ready to speak up, leave room and provide encouragement rather than crowding in upon any pretext. If one of you momentarily loses the thread, the other can come in and pick it up, then give it back. There are times when you should feel free to interrupt an exchange involving your partner(s), and other times when you should hold back until an appropriate later moment. With practice you will judge the style appropriate to these sessions, and will learn to make them work productively for all concerned. If you are unsure about a point, don't hesitate to ask direct questions, to secure elucidation before a more general confusion may start to prevail. Likewise, if you are asked a complex or challenging question, don't rush your answer; deliberate for a few moments, after which you may well explore out loud how your answer might go rather than trying to supply a ready-made snap reply.

17. Bear in mind also that all parts of the discussion are active for all of you, and that it is important to listen with fully alert attention to the contributions of your partner(s), so that you are not each conducting individual debates with your supervisor; at any point you are quite likely to be asked by your supervisor if you would agree with something your partner has just said, or would wish to qualify or extend it in any way. Such lateral queries are often devised to extend the debate sideways, to make it more inclusive and to bring areas of difference more fully into view. If your partner advances a line of interpretation which seems implausible to you, it is quite in order to make your own friendly intervention unprompted, and the general discussion may proceed sideways back and forth for a time. Collaboration can bring out variety of approaches, which leaves rivalry a long way beside the point.

18. A few words about *ideas*. This word has a venerable history, from Plato to Descartes to Locke to Kant (to name a few precursors), and there can be a field of definitions in which the word overlaps with *concept*, *thought*, *opinion*, *belief*, *notion*, etc. But here we can make do with a more approximate usage, that of a cluster of thoughts around a topic beginning to make sense or come into focus. As you read texts and commentary or critical argument, and gauge your own responses and opinions and begin to form arguments in your mind about them, testing them out and getting them into clearer order, such ideas will begin to emerge as thought-nuggets, with attached strands of potential narrative by means of which they might be expressed verbally, linked into arguments conducive to analysis, further exploration, and justification in discussion with others. You will for sure already have your own style of prospecting for ideas, many of them modifications of ideas derived from elsewhere, or joined-up sequences of several ideas taken together, occasionally including a brand-new thought all of your very own; but supervision discussions are a melting-pot for ideas often very intensively produced and explored, and so you will need to polish up your skills in handling them.

19. Don't go to a supervision with just your essay and no further ideas actively in mind. Ideas are the fuel of a good discussion, and if a few of yours get burned up in the heat of an argument, you get in exchange plenty of incentive to think out some more. Ideas that contribute well to a supervision are often helpfully provisional, with loose ends and untested applications, especially if you can assist in pushing them around in discussion without clinging on too possessively or defending them against all comers. Ideas that merely glitter with smartness are tiresome, as are inversions of fashionable clichés; and what may look like a fixed principle from your viewpoint may look to different viewpoints like just one possible position amongst others. The flow and counter-flow of ideas can be validated against texts, against historical or linguistic knowledge, against internal requirements of logical consistency or even just making clear sense. Clarifying an idea is often a way of seeing how it doesn't quite fit, and working it round to a closer match with what it seeks to explain, or with the question which it seeks to answer. Use your best thinking-time to get lots of ideas, so that when you reach your supervision you have plenty to offer and a framework against which to test the ideas offered by others taking part.

20. From time to time during a supervision you may find a moment to take a few notes, or to jot down the title of a work mentioned or a reminder of a point to be looked up and thought about later. But don't fall into the role of the partner who takes notes while the others maintain the discussion; following a developing exchange means taking in arguments and shaping your own views of them in your mind, ready at any point to improvise an expression of them and continue your thinking processes out loud. This is the exercise of controlled articulate reasoning, shaped up in linguistic form even when you are silent, so that when you speak it is your continuing thought that transfers out into speech before resuming its silent but active interior discussion in your mind. If a line of argument seems to you approaching the dogmatic and one-track, exercise yourself by ranging over alternatives, to test what is being expounded; if the discussion seems to be unfocussed and running in too many directions, try to rally for yourself its central thrust and see where it ought best to be leading. You may at any point interject, tentatively, to shape the discussion rather than just to contribute subordinate points. But intellectual concentration and stamina are prime requisites, and practice will help you to develop these survival skills.

21. When you are giving your own opinion, or trying out an idea, keep control of your choice of words and expression, to make them express your meaning as clearly as you can. Try to articulate well and to maintain a coherent grammar; there is no call to pontificate, but it's worth trying not to yabble. Sometimes you may need to hesitate in order to get the right word; there is no merit in rushing at a new line of reasoning and getting into an immediate tangle, and if you hear yourself saying something that isn't quite what you intend, you can veer back to try again. When your supervisor interjects to ask what you mean by the use of a particular term this is not a sarcastic hint, but rather a move to explore precision in what may be a pivotal turn in the argument; such queries will give you and your partner(s) the chance to pause and sharpen your definitions. Sometimes the crucial issue

will rest on what a particular term meant within the period under study, rather than in its present-day development; preparation for a supervision session might well include your own review of key terms you are likely to need and the kinds of accuracy required for their effective use.

22. At the point when critical argument and discussion reach forward to overall expressions of judgement, of evaluative appraisal, remember how fatuous is the dictum about not disputing over differences of taste. Taste is reasoned preference and is based on principles and criteria for esteem, derived from positive accomplishments of active intelligence and powerful imagination evidenced in the literary work under discussion. There will of course be a range of differences in considered judgement, each viewpoint worthy of respect even when not fully shared; but some opinions cannot be convincingly justified because they rest on notably insufficient analysis or acts of demonstrably inaccurate recognition. If you find yourself with an extremely deviant overall stance, you will need to consider whether you have worked it out rather than jumped to conclusions or yielded to fashion. More likely, at least initially, is a situation where you can see how a powerful critical judgement makes sense, but where you feel personally unready to make up your mind decisively; this is an honourably interim position, so long as you see it as part of an unfinished project in your individual development.

23. Remember to keep your sense of proportion intact, and your sense of humour. If you stumble into what looks like an important or central disagreement, either negative or positive, it may be best to make a mental note for later rather than to start off a hard question before you are ready. Then you can use part of the following week to ponder and explore, and develop the consequences of your difference of opinion, so that you will be ready to raise the matter at an early stage of the supervision next following. Or you may want to write a succinct codicil or supplement to your previous essay, setting out some reasoning and inviting comment from your supervisor. Remember that all these sessions are experimental, not conducted along hard-and-fast lines. Your supervisor may be able to suggest particular reading or lines of further thought that will enable you to test and develop the problem issue, and on a later occasion you may decide to make it the topic of a special kind of more deliberated essay.

24. The above is in fact a special case of a general practice: making active use of the aftermath of a supervision session. When you are done and back in the world, find an early opportunity to make a review. Read your essay carefully so as to take stock of the annotations, and of the points that arose in discussion; make your own record of these points, and note any which mean that you should return to a perusal of the text under discussion, or consider the bearing of some other text mentioned in connection with it. Review in your mind the criticism of your essay, and add notes or comments to your script in rectification of its weak moments. If there is a persistent weakness of method, or style and grammar, take positive steps to see how you can improve and surmount the problem. If something went wrong with your essay's overall construction, look back to see where the original essay plan must have taken a wrong turning.

25. If you seem to have omitted links or aspects of your topic, outside the

range of your essay, which your supervisor pointed out as important, you may want to write a few additional paragraphs while your thoughts are fresh. Look up and record definitions of words that gave you difficulty or seemed unexpectedly important in the discussion. If certain particular aspects of the secondary critical discussion of your text were mentioned as likely to be of special interest to you, take steps to locate the book or journal and if possible read and ponder the material before you are swallowed up in the work for your next essay. If there are still large outstanding questions which you find that you cannot yet settle, make a record of the main outlines and the evidence pro and con, so that when you later return to these uncertainties you will be able to locate their central features. It may also be useful to review or continue certain aspects of the discussion along with your supervision partner(s), to explore the issues together while they are alive in your minds.

26. Remember that your supervisor will be in regular contact with your director of studies, to pass on impressions of how things are going, and at the end of the term's course he or she will write a report that both your director of studies and tutor will receive; this review of your progress will be communicated to you by your tutor and maybe also by your director of studies, who will also enquire of you from time to time how things are going, so as to hear your side of the progress being made. In difficult cases, if you feel that a particular course of supervisions is not going well for you, be sure to call in to see your director of studies for a confidential discussion, so that the problems can be looked at and possible remedies considered; don't delay in doing this, and there is no need to be shy, since it is important that you should feel confident in your own good progress.

27. Over time you should begin to get to know each of your supervisors quite well as a person, and should feel free to ask for suggestions in wider reading, help with puzzles arising from lectures or plans for future work. Try not to miss supervisions or be late in handing in essays if you want the connection to prosper; but remember too that a demure and compliant pupil is not so interesting as a human being who has coherent personal convictions, who is prepared to strike an independent line and to develop an original taste not too much damaged by mere wayward eccentricity. It is possible for supervision work to unlock a major creative development if you and your partners can commit yourselves fully to it and learn how to make it fully productive.

J.H. Prynne
Director of Studies in English

Gonville and Caius College,
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