

WILLIAMS-EXETER PROGRAMME AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY

Thinking About Tutorials & Making Wise Tutorial Selections

2017-2018

During the 2017-2018 year you will be a Visiting Student at Oxford University and will have the opportunity to study a variety of subjects in the tutorial format. The Oxford University educational system is quite different from the liberal arts environment at Williams College and you may find it helpful to understand some of these differences as you prepare to begin your studies at Oxford.

Students admitted to Oxford University spend three years (occasionally four) studying a single subject. For example, students admitted to “read history” will typically enroll in history tutorials, *and nothing else*, for the duration of their undergraduate studies. While Williams College students are accustomed to receiving grades for each course they take at Williams, Oxford students do not receive grades for individual tutorials. Rather, the tutorials are merely a way to help prepare the students for a series of “examination papers” in their chosen subjects that are administered at various points during their three (or four) years of study. Performance on these examinations determines the “class” of degree they receive at the end of their studies. These examinations consist of what are known as the “First Public Examinations” (“Moderations”, “Honour Moderations”, or “Preliminary Examinations”), which all students sit at the end of their first year in Oxford. Then, before they receive their degrees, normally at the end of their third year in residence, they sit what are collectively known as the “Second Public Examinations”, or their final examinations in the Honour Schools (they are known as “finalists” in “Schools”). How they perform on these examinations determines the class of degree they receive (first class, high second class, low second class, third class, etc). During their time at Oxford, they are prepared for these examinations in a number of different ways—first and foremost by undertaking tutorial work, second by attending lectures, third by participating in some small classes, and, fourth, in the sciences, by undertaking laboratory work (or what is known in Oxford as “practicals”).

The tutorial system is the crucial ingredient of the Oxford University education. At Oxford, students are prepared for the various examination “papers” by their tutors. In many respects a tutor is like a coach, preparing students for the examination in a particular area. In a typical tutorial, the tutor will assign his or her students a significant amount of reading to undertake each week (sometimes a dozen or more books and an equal number of articles) on a topic related to the general theme of the paper/course. After reading through this material, a student will “prepare an essay” (write a paper), which is then discussed with the tutor (and often read aloud) at their weekly meeting. A tutorial sometimes consists of just the student and his or her tutor; increasingly, however, there might be two or three students in a tutorial group.

The Oxford academic year consists of three terms – Michaelmas (October-December), Hilary (January-March), and Trinity (April-June). There are eight weeks of instruction in each term, and students will normally meet with their tutor once a week (and write one essay per week) for each of the papers they are reading (i.e., examination papers they are being prepared for). Oxford students generally have between eight and sixteen tutorial meetings (or “tutes”) per term – equivalent to what Williams terms one and two tutorial courses (each tutorial course normally consisting of eight tutes).

Wholly independent of the tutorials are lecture series offered by the various faculties (departments) that are also intended to prepare students for the first or second public examinations. As a result, a student might be doing a paper in Russian Government and Politics, for which s/he will be expected to attend a weekly tutorial and write a weekly essay. *In addition*, the student may be expected to attend a series of related lectures on the topic of the tutorials. Note that these lectures may be offered during terms other than the term during which the tutorial meetings are scheduled and it is important to plan accordingly. Therefore, when choosing a paper to read (i.e., a course to take), you should make sure you have first attended the lectures for that paper (or are attending the lectures during the term in which you are undertaking their tutorials).

There are a staggering number of subjects taught at Oxford. Some of these are required for the degree in certain fields; others are optional (often known as “options,” “special subjects,” or “further subjects”). From the many tutorial possibilities, we list in the *Williams College Bulletin* as WIOX courses some of the papers that have been frequently taken by Williams-Exeter students. Most of the tutorial courses listed in the *Williams College Bulletin* are standard “papers” that comprise the Oxford degrees in the various subjects. Their presence in the *Bulletin* means that in the past Directors have succeeded in securing tutors to teach these subjects to Williams students. However, demand, leave patterns, and many other constraints mean that not all of these tutorial subjects can be staffed in all terms. A more current resource for identifying courses of interest is included at the end of this document: *How to Make Preliminary Tutorial Choices*.

Courses not listed in the *Bulletin* or the *How to Make Preliminary Tutorial Choices* guide can be taken by WEPO students as long as they are “papers” that are regularly offered at Oxford as either a required or optional part of the degree in various disciplines. Normally what we would call independent study courses at Williams are not available in Oxford, although occasionally it has been possible to arrange teaching of special topics. Finding tutors to teach material that varies from the standard degree “papers” offered by the University is extremely difficult, however. Consequently, in most fields it is only possible to staff tutorials that are regularly offered Oxford degree papers.

While it is indeed possible to study a large number of different subjects at Oxford, one has to do some work to figure out what actually *can* be studied and *when* it can be studied, as not all papers are offered every term.

After consulting the *How to* guide and the *Williams College Bulletin*, you might find it useful to explore other Oxford offerings. Before delving into the *University of Oxford Examination Regulations*, you might consider using online sources:

<http://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/course-a%E2%80%93listing>

Note that, in this context, “course” refers to a course of study. Oxford students typically spend their entire 3 years as undergraduates studying one “course” (e.g., Economics; Politics; English). When you click on a “course” you should be able to find out about some of the standard “papers” (i.e., tutorial topics) that are available.

You might also consult various faculty websites at Oxford (go to the Oxford University home page—www.ox.ac.uk—and then click on “Divisions/Departments”), some of which list the papers taught as part of the degree offerings by that faculty. The links to many of these websites can be found in the WEPO section of the *College Bulletin*. The best place to look on any individual Faculty website is usually the “Undergraduate Handbook” (typically a large .PDF file). The Handbook is usually under the tab for “current students”. Scrolling or word-searching through the Handbook will usually lead you to the various papers available to undergraduates. A comprehensive list of the papers that make up the degree requirements in a given fields may be found in the bulky *University of Oxford Examination Regulations*, a copy of which can be found in the Dean’s Office. This is by no means an easy task, given that neither this massive document nor the Oxford curriculum is arranged in such a way that makes much sense to those familiar with the American college catalogue and the disciplinary boundaries characteristic of US higher education.

First, a note about the architecture of the *Examination Regulations*, which you should be able to figure out by looking at the table of contents at the beginning. Despite its size, only about half of the material in the book is relevant to you. The first hundred pages or so lists all the regulations pertaining to the course of study students must undertake in their chosen field during their first year in Oxford; in part, it lists the work students must do in order to be prepared for the examination papers they will sit at the end of their first year when they take the First Public Examinations. This might be useful to look at, although it is not as important as working more systematically through the description of the requirements for students in their second, third (and sometimes fourth) years. This can be found in the *Examination Regulations* under the heading “Special Regulations for Honour Schools.” Here you should be able to get a good sense of how instruction works in particular fields.

Be prepared to spend some time finding your way around this text. Once you’ve browsed and considered your possibilities, you should be able to make some good tutorial choices. Please be aware, however, that due to the limited availability of tutors in certain subject areas, the Programme may not be able to find a tutor for the subject you request. Moreover, “papers” are normally only offered in specific terms at Oxford, and it is difficult or even impossible to secure tutors for papers in terms when those papers are not offered. It is quite likely that, in reviewing your choices for tutorials, the Director will identify scheduling challenges. As such, ***it is absolutely critical that you regularly check***

for emails from the Programme Director and promptly reply to any questions. Doing so will help to insure that you are able to take tutorials about which you are genuinely interested.

As noted above, a list of some (but not all) of the tutorial courses that students have undertaken in Oxford in the past few years can be found in the *How to* guide and in the most recent edition of the *Williams College Bulletin*. You should not, however, restrict yourself to doing only what other students have done. Rather, you should make the most of your year in Oxford by finding the subjects that are most interesting and important to you by thoroughly researching your field of interest in the *Examination Regulations* and in the websites of the various university Faculties.