KEBLE AT LARGE

**PPE**

APPLICATION GUIDE

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| **Deadline for applying through UCAS** | **15th October 2016** |
| **A-Level requirements** | **AAA** |
| **Aptitude test?** | **Yes – The TSA** |
| **Course length** | **3 years** |
| **Qualification** | **BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics** |

**UCAS Application**

* As with all UK universities, applying to Oxford starts with UCAS; however, the Oxford application deadline is in mid-October, which is far earlier than those of other universities.
* Part of your application will be references submitted by your teachers, recommending you for your ability, interest, and – possibly - how hard you work. Don’t listen to people who dismiss these completely: mine were brought up in my Keble interview, so it’s definitely true that they get read. Don’t worry too much, though, as your teachers will probably be saying positive things about you!
* All your academic and extracurricular achievements also get entered into UCAS. Guidelines and statistics regarding the academic requirements for an application to the university can be found here: http://www.ppe.ox.ac.uk/images/course\_statistics\_2016.pdf
* This website gives detailed information about past applicants, including their percentage of A\*s at GCSE and their scores in entrance exams. It is important to remember, however, that academic scores are considered in light of your school’s performance: for example, GCSE results that outperform the average from your school will be flagged up even if you have a lower number of A\*s than other applicants.
* Therefore, there is no specific GCSE grade requirement for an Oxford place, although all applicants must meet an AAA offer at A level.
* There are no official subject requirements for PPE – though it is useful, you do not need to have studied Philosophy, Politics, or Economics. Other useful subjects noted are History (or an essay-based subject) and Mathematics.
* From the PPE admissions website: “Although Mathematics is not formally required for admission, PPE applicants need to have sufficient aptitude for mathematics to cope with the mathematical elements of the course. Mathematics is a particular advantage for the Economics component of PPE, as well as for the first year logic course in Philosophy, and for understanding theories and data in Politics.”

DO take note of this – the Economics course can be very difficult if you strongly dislike or have trouble with Maths. Although there are helpful supplementary Maths courses you can take whilst at university, it is valuable to have a good grasp beforehand.

Do remember that if you are good at maths but don’t particularly like it/don’t wish to pursue it at a more difficult level, you can drop Economics after first year.

**Personal Statement**

* Writing a personal statement is probably the hardest part of your application. Ask around for examples and you’ll see a huge variety of structures and content. It’s important to realise there is no formula for the perfect personal statement; it is personal and is used to showcase your personality, achievements, and (importantly) interests.
* A personal statement is important, but do not go crazy trying to make it perfect – it is not the only defining factor of your application. In fact, the PPE Statistics report states it has a lower importance than, for example, the TSA results or your predicted grades. Having noted this, do not ignore it – it is likely to come up in interviews, and could end up being a decisive factor in your application.
* DO NOT spend hours trawling through The Student Room reading about the amazing achievements of people who have done EVERYTHING, had three A\*s predicted and supposedly got in: a lot of these are fake and it’s important to make sure you’re talking about yourself, not someone else!
* Whilst the personal statement is about you, in order to help your application, it is good to read up on what each university wants to see from applicants - this can then be used as a potential structure. The PPE page mentions these amongst others: *Application and interest, an independent and reflective approach to learning,*

*ability to analyse and solve problems using logical and critical approaches, flexibility and willingness to consider alternative views, willingness and ability to express ideas clearly and effectively on paper and orally; ability to give considered responses.*

* Make sure you read the Oxford website for PPE and familiarize yourself with what the course structure is and what you will be studying. This is helpful because it gives you an overview of what the degree is like and can help you decide whether you really want to study PPE. On top of this, it can help you tailor your personal statement, and ensure (for example) that you don’t say you’re really excited to study Eastern Philosophy, when that isn’t part of the course.
* PPE candidates are not necessarily expected to have studied any Philosophy, Politics or Economics at school, so it might be hard to speak about other A-level subjects. However, what admissions officers look for is interest and skills. Even if you haven’t studied Politics, you can mention how you keep up to date with political news, or how you read a book/article related to a political topic, or how you found volunteering or work experience related to Politics (the same goes for Philosophy and Economics).
* More things your personal statement can include: motivation behind your choice to study PPE, reference to particular aspects of your A level courses that you enjoy/that are relevant to PPE, work experience and volunteering, extracurricular activities as well as any extended reading you may have done (do not lie about this, they might ask you about it at interview!) .
* Another good tip when writing personal statements is to not just mention what you have done and what you are good at – but mention WHY these are relevant to the admissions officer. For everything you include in your personal statement ask yourself HOW it is demonstrating your aptitude or passion for the course.   
  For example:   
   🡪Instead of just saying you read a book on Utilitarianism, say why you chose it, what you learnt from it, what your personal response to it was, whether you agreed or disagreed with the arguments, whether it prompted you to be more interested in another area of philosophy or ethics, etc.

🡪Instead of just saying you volunteered at your local council/for an NGO, say why you chose that volunteering opportunity, what you learnt, what it has shown you about your degree or the real world, how you could apply the skills and knowledge you learnt to your university experience or to your future career, etc.

🡪This can also be done even with non-academic activities: instead of simply stating you have a black belt in karate or have obtained a certain grade in an instrument, you could mention what skills you have learnt from it, how it shows dedication, patience, and enthusiasm that you might also show for your degree, how it demonstrates your ability to have a goal and follow it, etc.

* Oxford knows that you might be applying for other courses (with PPE especially) so there is no real need to name-drop, or to specifically mention “PPE” as the course you are applying for. For example, if you are applying for a Government and Philosophy course at another university it is still possible to work both of these into one personal statement: just mention your interests in areas that apply to both, do not specifically mention the course name and try to find the common points of the courses (but make sure the courses you are applying to are similar).
* Make sure you proofread your personal statement and read it over many times, editing if necessary. It is also helpful to have someone else read over to make sure your ideas are clear.
* Needless to say, do not copy or plagiarise someone else’s personal statement!

**Work Experience/Volunteering**

* Although the application process doesn’t require you to have any work experience in an area related to Philosophy, Politics, or Economics, if you are able to get some kind of work or internship it is something great to talk about in your personal statement. Also, it can help you decide what kind of degree path you want to follow – if you get work experience in a bank or a financial firm, you might discover you really like it and therefore choose to continue Economics in your second and third years.
* However, universities know work experience is not always possible to obtain, so don’t worry if you can’t get any.
* Volunteering is another great addition to a personal statement and it ticks the ‘personable’ box on your application. Try to actually commit to it, though, rather than dabbling purely to be able to put it down – it’s much more impressive and it’ll seem more genuine.
* Finding volunteering opportunities is much easier than finding work experience, and can include any of the following, and more: working at Old People’s homes, helping at your local Foodbank, tutoring younger kids at your school, etc. Luckily, PPE is a broad subject so volunteering does not have to be directly linked to any of the three subjects, however, if you can find volunteer work related to Philosophy, Politics or Economics it will give you things to discuss in personal statement/interviews and help you see what you like.
* If you’re struggling to find something, have a look online, as there are many clubs that would happily have a volunteer if you get in contact with them.
* Use your initiative when it comes to applying to work experience or volunteering: a position may not be advertised, but a phone call/letter of enquiry may do the trick if you can demonstrate you’re really keen
* Once again, volunteering is recommended, but not essential; if you try your best and can’t find any opportunities, the university will not hold this against you!

**Recommendations for Reading**

* PPE is very broad, so it is a good idea to explore the subjects, pick a few areas that interest you, then focus on those and read about them. It is good to have a wide base of knowledge of the common topics of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics, but it is also interesting (and valuable) to have a more in-depth knowledge of a specific topic. This will allow you to have something to talk about in your personal statement or interview that you know more about and that can really show your interest and excitement for the subject.
* Remember admissions officers are looking for students that are engaged with the three subjects: they are not looking for someone that memorizes and repeats what they read in *The Economist* or they saw on the news, but for someone that can analyse a topic, view it from different sides, and form an opinion. It is not worth reading 100 books if you are only learning facts and not actually engaging with them – better to read 3 and really think about what they are saying, how you respond to them, what the argument is, and what the strengths/weaknesses are.
* Do not think you need know the entire history of Philosophy, the entire timeline of British Politics, exactly what happened during the Great Recession, and who all the greatest philosophers/politicians/economists are. There’s definitely no harm in knowing these things, but the interviewers do not expect you to be an expert in the subject – that’s why you’re going to study it. Also, don’t feel you need to find out about the areas of expertise of tutors at Keble: they’re not going to ask you about their own research.
* On the other hand, you should be at least be familiar with current affairs, which often come up in interviews. It is highly recommended to read a good quality newspaper and watch or listen to news and current affairs programmes.
* For specific books, check out the recommended reading lists for PPE:

<http://www.ppe.ox.ac.uk/index.php/how-to-prepare-for-ppe>

\*A rather simple but useful book for Philosophy is “The Philosophy Gym” by Stephen Law, which gives you a general overview of common philosophical problems and teaches you to explore the arguments from both sides. This is particularly helpful for interview practice. “An Introduction to Political Philosophy” by Jonathan Wolff is more difficult, but excellent (and useful for the course itself).

**Aptitude Test**

* To make an application to Oxford for PPE you need to take the TSA (Thinking Skills Assessment). This is a 2-hour pre-interview test for applicants designed to help tutors assess whether candidates have the skills and aptitudes needed.
* Often, your school is not involved in arranging this exam so it is your responsibility to book yourself a place. Make sure you get this done before the deadline:

<http://www.admissionstestingservice.org/for-test-takers/thinking-skills-assessment/tsa-oxford/how-to-register/>

* From the website: “the TSA is a test of verbal, spatial and numerical reasoning, and also asks you to write an essay in order to demonstrate that you can construct a cogent and clear argument.”

It is 90 min of multiple choice and 30 min for writing a short essay.   
You do not need any particular knowledge about anything specific; it’s more a test of logic and of how good you are at identifying the structure of arguments, what they imply, and what their flaws are.

* The best (and probably only) way to study is by DOING PAST PAPERS. The first one you do might seem confusing and impossible and too long for the allotted time. However, if you keep doing them, you will begin to master the format, finish on time, and improve.   
  Remember to look at the answers, as well as the “Explanation of Results” documents on the websites – these are very helpful as they explain why one answer is correct or better than another one. These will help you understand the format of the questions and the ways of finding the correct answers.
* Do not forget the essay! Practice by writing timed essays: you will improve your thinking, planning, and writing speed, and you will have a better idea of how long you have for writing them.   
  It is hard to judge how good an essay is by yourself, so maybe get someone to read it over afterwards to see how clear and strong your argument is.   
  Remember the point of the essay is to construct a “cogent and clear argument” so do not spend lots on time on introductions and background and irrelevant information: get to the point. Make your argument clear as soon as possible, analyse the counter-arguments or possible contestations (and say why they are not enough to disprove or topple your argument), give relevant examples, and do not “sit on the fence” or argue for both sides without coming down on one side.
* Make sure to sleep well and have a good breakfast before the exam. Keep a cool head during the exam and just try and answer as many questions as you can (do not leave any blank - you have a 25% chance of getting it right!). Make sure you pay attention to when you only have 5 min left, so you can wrap up your essay – you do not want to run out of time mid-argument, it is better to reiterate your points and write a brief conclusion.

**Preparing for Interview**

* If your application passes the first round, you will be invited to interview at the University.
* The best preparation for interviews is to practice with mock interviews, or by watching some of the ones available online. Try to arrange them with teachers or adults who know about the subject (although they do not need to be experts). If they don’t know what to ask you, search for “common PPE interview questions online” and take inspiration from there.
* Remember interviews are quick (often 10-20 min) so do not spend hours on a single interview as you might get exhausted and stressed – it’s better to have shorter, more productive interviews with detailed feedback. At Keble, the last few years have had one interview for Economics and one for Philosophy and Politics combined. If possible, though, try to have at least one mock interview for each subject (Politics Philosophy and Economics) or, alternatively, have a single longer interview for all three.
* Having mock interviews can help you overcome the fear and stress related to them and to help you get familiar with timings and with the format of an interview – it is basically a long back-and-forth chat about arguments. You will get asked a question, for which you’ll form an argument (a response) and then the interviewer will question the assumptions, problems, and criticisms of your answer to help you be clearer about your response. You can change a particular answer as the discussion progresses, but make sure you have reasons for doing so: don’t simply change from “Yes” to “No” because the interviewer points out a problem with “Yes”; you can argue against their comment and maintain your position. Most questions do NOT have a ‘correct’ answer, so don’t try to guess what the interviewers want, their job is only to prod you and see how you argue and contest criticisms.
* For Politics and Philosophy, most questions will be about a popular topic in the fields For example, for Philosophy they might ask you about the Mind/Body problem, the Personal Identity problem, problems with Truth and Knowledge and others.  
  Questions include: “ Are you the same person you were when you were 5 years old? What does it mean for knowledge to be a justified true belief? What is the difference between History and Physics? “  
  For Politics, they are usually based on theoretical topics, such as the governments role and influence in society.

Questions might be: “Should we put in prison people who don’t pay their taxes? Should the US government impose a scheme to give retributions to the descendants of African-American slaves? Should the government be responsible for regulating obesity? “   
However, you might also be asked about an area of personal preference or a recent news topic.

* For Economics, they will usually set you a Game Theory-style problem, and get you to talk through your reasoning and answers. Google and research some common examples of game theory to familiarize yourself with them.

**Interview**

* Most colleges will give you two interviews, with different tutors, these may be on the same day or spread across a period of time- you’ll be given a room to stay in for the duration of your stay. There will be information points, usually in the colleges’ Junior Common Room (lists of interviews with time and place) and helping students that are there to make sure you know where you need to be and when.
* You might be interviewed at two colleges (referred to as “pooling”). This happens randomly and students are asked (on the 2nd or 3rd day) to go to an interview in another college. This doesn’t mean anything (or at least no one knows): you can get pooled and still get accepted at your first-choice college, you can get pooled and be accepted at that second college, or you can get pooled and still not get accepted.
* For the interview make sure you go over your personal statement and ensure you’re up to date with everything you said you have read/enjoy, you can expect tutors to pick out very random points from your personal statement and make you elaborate on them. Also be prepared to talk about the subjects you are currently taking in school, as this is also a common topic or question from interviewers.

Another good thing to prepare is an area of interest for each subject, this will help you answer generic questions such as: “Why PPE?” or “What area of Politics interests you?” or “Why is Economics important to you?”

Other than that, you can’t really prepare for what they will ask you in an interview. Remember it is not a test of existing knowledge but more an assessment of how you think and discuss. Be sure to present your arguments clearly and calmly, be prepared to respond to problems and criticisms of your arguments.

* Try to give a balanced view of every question, talking about the merits of each side and then deciding on your answer, rather than launching into a piece of rhetoric that dismisses one side entirely.
* Make sure to think out loud if you can - sitting in silence for a few seconds isn't terrible, but do try to describe your thought processes whenever you can.
* Don’t be afraid to ask questions or seek clarifications! You do not need to answer immediately after the interviewer asks a question. It is much better to take your time, think it over, form an argument, and if needed, ask relevant questions about the context before you answer.   
  Also, do not be afraid to say “I’m stuck” or “I don’t know” – the interviewers aren’t out to get you, they don’t want to see you fail. If you simply tell them you don’t understand something or you’re not following they will do their best to rephrase the question or give you a clue. It is much better to admit you’re having trouble than to try to answer a question with nonsense or made-up things (they’re professionals, they’ll see right through you!).
* On the day, many candidates may be dressed in quite a relaxed manner, as Oxford encourages applicants to dress comfortably. However, you can also dress smartly, and do not feel embarrassed about wearing a suit or a smart skirt and shirt.   
  This also applies for interviewers – some might be in very smart suits, whilst some will be in everyday relaxed clothes.
* The key advice in terms of what to wear is to make sure you present the best version of yourself. Whilst there is nothing wrong with trackies and trainers, its advised to dress more smartly in order to present yourself as a professional. There is no need to panic if you don’t have a fancy suit etc, a smart shirt and trousers will be fine. Wearing the wrong thing will not affect your chances of getting a place!
* Get plenty of sleep the day before the interview, make sure you have a good breakfast or lunch and that you go to the bathroom before. Make sure you’re early to the interview – always better to be early than late! Don’t bring in phones or if you do, turn them off.
* Remember to relax, and approach the interview as what it is – a discussion with some professors. Interviews can be very stimulating and interesting: they are not designed to be torturous experiences and the interviewers aren’t evil and don’t want to see you fail. It might sound cliché, but be yourself – don’t try to pretend to be a genius that knows every single answer and is always right.  
  If you do get stressed, take deep breaths, pause for a moment and always communicate to the interviewers what you need – they can help you if you get stuck with a question and they will understand if you get panicked.
* Remember no one knows how they did in the interview! Ignore applicants who come out of the interview saying they aced it and that it was so easy and that they will get in. You can think you aced the interviews and not get in, and vice versa – lots of people think they were awful and still get accepted.
* When you’re not having interviews, take some time to get to know other applicants or helping students, or explore Keble and Oxford. Interview time can be a fun and wonderful experience!

**Further Questions?**

If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to e-mail Keble At Large at kebleatlarge@outlook.com