The breadth and flexibility of the Cambridge course constitute both its challenge and its excitement: challenge because you can never say you’ve read enough (there are always new books to discover, new avenues to explore); excitement because the opportunity is constantly there to devise a personal programme of study as you work through each period of literary history.

The Cambridge supervision system, which offers students a significant amount of one-to-one teaching with their supervisors, is designed to facilitate this very individual process of selection. Our primary role, as the English Fellows at Peterhouse, is to guide and advise our students as they pursue a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to immerse themselves in books and reflect on the endless questions which the written word poses. There are no limits to this canvas. The whole history of human feeling is yours to study.

We conceive of English studies as a rigorous but rewarding and good-humoured discipline, and we approach it with three principal aims in mind. First, we press our students always to scrutinise ‘the words on the page’, to examine in exacting detail the implications of particular turns of phrase, choices of metre or verse form, and even individual words. Secondly, though, we also emphasise the importance of attending to the contexts of literature, the social, moral, religious, political and scientific horizons which inform a text’s meaning at any given point in history. Thirdly, we stress the benefits of exploration, of rediscovering once popular but now forgotten works which may not initially appeal yet reward persistent investigation.

So is this the course for you? The best way to determine that is to take a few days, perhaps during a holiday, and explore some books which are very different from those you’ve studied at school. Read a poetry anthology (the more wide-ranging the better), try some eighteenth or mid-nineteenth century novels, explore a new Shakespeare play, and ask yourself, in each case, if this is something which interests you and provokes your curiosity. You might also like to explore the Cambridge Authors website for further ideas.
Teaching methods

Broadly speaking, all Cambridge colleges offer teaching for the English degree in similar ways. First, the Faculty of English arranges daily lectures which cover a range of literary topics relevant to the BA degree. Then the Directors of Studies in each college - there are usually two for English at Peterhouse - arrange more structured, individual tuition for their own college’s students. This takes the form of weekly year-group classes and also of one-to-one or two-to-one supervisions, i.e. weekly meetings between one or two students and whoever is their supervisor that term, at which the students have the chance to discuss that week’s reading and essay-work with a specialist in the field. A typical week for Peterhouse first years involves attending eight or so one-hour lectures, one or two one-hour supervisions on the main literary texts being studied that week, and perhaps one College discussion class.

English at Peterhouse

English is generously supported at Peterhouse, which means that we can supervise you on all aspects of your first and second-year courses and a good deal of your chosen final-year courses in-house. Jennifer Wallace, who has published books on Shelley, on Keats, on the archaeological imagination from Stonehenge to Ground Zero, on nineteenth century classical reception, and on tragedy, and who produced the Cambridge Greek Play at the Arts Theatre in 2019, teaches eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature and also the Tragedy paper. Steven Connor, who has published 18 books, on Dickens, Joyce, Beckett, and the post-war novel, on postmodernism and the question of cultural value, as well as on topics such as the ideas of air, magic, skin, and sport in different cultures, on the place of sound, music and the voice in human history, on flies in art and literature, on the relation between numbers and words, on imaginary machines, fantasies of knowledge and the anthropology of civility, teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century topics as well as papers on literary theory, philosophy and visual culture. James Wade, who is an expert in medieval romance and Arthurian literature and has published a book on fairies in medieval romance, teaches medieval literature and Shakespeare. Simon Jackson, the Director of Music at Peterhouse and an expert on the poetry of George Herbert, regularly supervises students for the course in Renaissance literature.
Students’ views

‘Studying English at Peterhouse has been such a fulfilling, brilliant experience. I have been encouraged to pursue my own literary interests, such as writing my final year dissertation on literature born from the Indian Partition of 1947. My academic journey has been supported with great pastoral care, emphasising the importance of good mental health and taking care of this aspect during my studies in English, so that I have thoroughly enjoyed my time!’

Aisha, English finalist 2020

The application process

Applicants for English should be studying A level English Literature (or equivalent). Occasionally, applicants are admitted who have taken A level English Language and Literature instead. In addition, it is helpful if applicants have taken one or more related subjects, such as History or classical or modern languages to A level (or equivalent). However, we also welcome applicants who have studied less obviously English-related subjects, for example Mathematics or the sciences.

All applicants for English across the University will be asked to sit a pre-interview written assessment (the English Literature Admissions Tests, ELAT) at their school, college or local testing centre on 4th November. These will form part of our holistic assessment of candidates’ achievements, abilities and potential and are no more, and no less important than any of the other pieces of information considered during the admissions process. Registration for this assessment closes on 15th October. Further information can be found on the University website.

We ask all our English applicants to send us two examples of recent English essays. In reading these, we look for evidence of (amongst other things) candidates’ understanding of the ways in which writers’ choices of form, structure and language shape the meaning of literary texts.

There are normally two half-hour interviews, usually with Fellows of Peterhouse and an Admissions Tutor. During these interviews applicants can expect to discuss the school essay submitted beforehand, set texts they’ve been studying in the classroom, and other works which have formed part of their own wider reading. You will be asked to do 15 minutes of preparatory reading before one or both of these interviews.

If English is not your first language, it is essential that your English language skills are good enough for you to undertake an intensive and challenging academic course that is taught and examined in English. Therefore, you may be asked to achieve a formal qualification in English Language. If you are taking subjects that require
extensive reading and writing in English as part of your school work and are generally being taught in English by native speakers, this condition may be met by your school exams. It is however likely that you will be asked to achieve an IELTS qualification as part of the conditions for your offer. In English this is typically 8 or 8.5, with a score of at least 8 in written English.

Typical conditional offers

Our typical conditional offer for English is A*AA at A level. IB offers are usually for a minimum of 40-42 points, to include 776 or 777 at Higher level in relevant subjects. Offers are designed to be realistic, taking into account individual circumstances, and to reflect potential and likely levels of achievement. Most of those who receive offers will attain the grades required.

Career opportunities

Vocationally, one of the great benefits of reading English at Cambridge is that it expands (rather than restricts) the employment opportunities available to you after graduation. In the past two decades Peterhouse English graduates have taken up a wide range of careers after leaving the College. These have included legal work, management consultancy, international development, teaching, charity work, postgraduate research, and journalism. As befits a College whose alumni include the theatre directors Richard Eyre, Simon McBurney, Sam Mendes and Robert Hastie, the TV scriptwriter Freddy Syborn and the comedians David Mitchell and John Finnemore, a number of Peterhouse English students have gone on, too, to become actors, directors, script-writers, stand-up comedians and creative writers. Other typical careers pursued by English graduates include publishing, political research, academia, work in the civil service and foreign office and arts administration.