

## What Do Universities Want?

Students in years twelve and thirteen, and their parents and teachers, want to know what qualities admissions tutors look for in applicants to university courses. Some university departments require particular combinations of subjects and some favour certain extra-curricular activities. But in some subjects, like philosophy, admissions tutors look for personal characteristics, habits, aptitudes and attitudes rather than particular bodies of factual knowledge or extra-curricular experience. Specifically, we look for *independent-minded curiosity*. Our ideal student takes the trouble to investigate things that most people don't think about. We want the person who hears someone say "Best friends forever!" and wonders whether a friendship that lasts forever really is the best sort. Or the person who, writing a history essay on 'the causes of the Second World War', finds themselves wondering about what it *means* for one thing to cause another. We also look for *mature sociability*. Our preferred applicant can work with others both inside and outside the classroom.

These qualities are not fixed features of a person, like blood-group or eye-colour. They can be cultivated. They involve habits that you can purposefully develop. One strategy for developing curiosity is to write down questions as they occur to you, and make time to investigate them. Another is to develop the intellectual side of your hobbies and interests. Every activity has books and articles written about it. If you study them, you will be able to talk about your extra-curricular life in a way that a university admissions interviewer might find interesting and impressive. At the very least, you should read beyond your formal academic subjects. It matters less what you read about than that you should be able to talk about it with insight and relish.

That said, it is difficult to cultivate independent-minded curiosity on your own, which is where mature sociability comes in. Independence does not mean studying in isolation. A group of students coming up with their own question and working out for themselves how to research it is a perfect case of independence. As well as curiosity, our ideal student has the personal qualities that make for successful group work. This matters because working together with your classmates outside the classroom is one of the best ways to improve results and develop intellectual independence. It is especially important at university, where there is usually much less formal classroom time than at school. However, there are all sorts of ways that studying with classmates can go wrong if you (or they) lack the necessary characteristics.

Working with other students from your class requires discipline and focus to stick to the job. You have to be (or become) the sort of person who arrives at a meeting on time and properly prepared. The best academic results come from working things out together, and this demands personal qualities such as kindness, patience, tact and the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly. It also requires honesty—you may be tempted to steal someone else's idea. It helps if the people you work with are more than just classmates, because there must be mutual respect and trust between you. In a critical discussion, there is always the chance that someone will show that your favourite idea is mistaken. You cannot avoid this risk, so it's important that you trust each other to offer criticism without malice. It helps too if you have some common interests and a shared sense of humour. But you don't have to agree about everything. In fact, it helps if you have different opinions.

There are techniques that can help you to develop this kind of mature sociability. To see how they work, it is helpful to look at a side of academic life that is usually hidden from public view.

## **Peer Review**

A scientific paper may have many authors (especially in those experimental sciences that require one team to work the experimental machinery and another team to understand the mathematics of the theory that the experiment tests). But in the humanities and some parts of the social sciences, scholarly books and articles usually have just one author. However, **academics in these areas form reading groups, listen to and criticise each other's papers in seminars, read each other's drafts, give each other *ad hoc* tutorials and suggest sources.** There is almost always a place where the author acknowledges other people's contributions. In an academic book, there may be a short section near the beginning called 'Acknowledgements', where the author thanks the editor(s) and anyone else who read drafts of the book and suggested improvements. Sometimes, an academic writer may thank groups of people, such as "the postgraduate students in my class where I first tried out these ideas" or "my colleagues in the department of X...". There may be people who helped with finding or translating materials that the author cites in the book. If the research had special funding, it is usual to thank the funding body. Sometimes, these lists of thanks can run to several pages. It is usual to include family members for their emotional support and to end with something like "these people all helped to make this book better than it would otherwise have been. Its remaining flaws are my responsibility alone".

Academic research articles rarely have whole pages of thanks but there is usually a footnote where the author thanks people who played some part in improving earlier versions of the paper. This list of helpers almost always includes the anonymous reviewers or referees. When a researcher sends a piece of writing to an academic journal, the editor of the journal sends it to one or more academic experts who help the editor to decide whether the paper is worth publishing and if so whether it has any problems that need fixing before it is allowed into print. These experts are the reviewers or referees. It is very rare for a journal to publish an article without the reviewers identifying some problem or suggesting some improvement. Usually, the author and referees are anonymous to each other. In spite of this, the relationship is intimate because the referees see the author's thoughts before they are ready for public view. In some cases, an article might go back and forth several times before publication. Apart from the brief note of thanks in a footnote, this whole process is invisible to the readers of the journal.

Referees' reports are some of the most useful documents in academic life, first for the editor of the journal who has to decide whether to publish the article and second to the author of the article for the critical feedback that the referees give. Third, writing a report on someone else's work can be a stimulating exercise for the referee. When the referee comes to write research articles, he or she will be better able to anticipate misunderstandings and objections. It is very useful to be able to read your own work as if someone else wrote it, and the best way to develop that skill is to read other people's work.

## Students Helping Each Other

The refereeing process is an extreme version of a technique we call 'double-distancing'. One side of double-distancing is the use of an agreed standard for judging written work (like marking criteria). This separates (or 'distances') the critic from the criticism—the criteria or standards are impersonal, they are not the critic's own invention. The other side of double-distancing is a clear understanding that the object of criticism is the *work*, not the *author*. Critics and referees should say, for example, "The third paragraph is unclear" rather than "The author scrambles the third paragraph".

Like teachers, critics and referees should always find something to praise. The referee must avoid the temptation to write a report that says, in effect, "This is not the paper that I would have written". Of course not! Someone else wrote it, and it expresses that person's particular talents, interests and judgements. A good referee can recognise high-quality work without agreeing with its conclusions.

You can do something like this with your classmates. You can use double-distancing to reduce the emotional risks of criticising each other's academic work. When you read someone else's work, you can take on the role of referee. When someone criticises your work, make a point of publicly thanking them for the help they have given. If you make a habit of using these techniques, you will develop the qualities necessary for academic success.

**So if you want to impress admissions tutors AND do well at university when you get there, try to become this sort of person: intellectually independent and socially mature.**