TIPS ON LECTURES, FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

1. These notes are written principally for undergraduates starting out in their first year of the English course at Caius, though they may have a use for students at a later stage, as a reminder. Your first few weeks in Cambridge will pitch you into many new activities, which you will need to learn to manage. Take comfort from the fact that all your contemporaries are in the same boat; and meanwhile the following survival guide may assist you.

2. Teaching at Cambridge is divided broadly into two kinds: that given by the College, and that given by the University. Teaching given by the College may be by supervisions (known elsewhere as 'tutorials'), weekly sessions normally in pairs for which you will normally write an essay or prepare a topic; or by classes, also often weekly but in larger groups and for which you will prepare topics or material but will not always write an essay. Translation classes are a special case because very often if not always you will prepare written work for each session, but in the form of translation exercises. This College teaching is not mentioned again in these notes, because it will be explained to you as you venture upon it.

3. University teaching given by the Faculty of English is also divided into kinds: there are lectures, classes, seminars and other special-group arrangements; but the largest and most challenging kind of teaching for new-comers to adjust to is lectures. For lectures you will mostly not write essays, but there will certainly be reading to undertake and material to prepare. These notes will try to explain the system and also the ways in which you can learn to use it effectively.

4. Before the start of each Full Term the Faculty of English announces its schedule of lectures for the term ahead, by means of a booklet titled *Notes on Courses* and also by posting on the Faculty website (current electronic address is www.english.cam.ac.uk). Lectures may be single sessions, given by a teaching member of the Faculty or sometimes by a distinguished outsider; or they may be arranged in a linked course of sessions. Some courses are arranged as 'circuses', in which the sequence as a whole has an overall connecting theme but in which each component lecture is given by a different person, sometimes including an outside guest lecturer. Some courses will consist of two or four lectures, in sequence; some may run over two terms and consist of 16 lectures; but the most usual is eight lectures running through the eight weeks of a teaching term.

5. Similar schedules are announced by all the faculties and departments in the University and there will also be Open Lectures and other special events. As undergraduates in the English Faculty you are free to attend any of these courses as well as any of those in our own Faculty; but remember that courses for professionals in other disciplines will move fast and will involve methods and assumptions that you may not be able to grasp easily. Open Lectures, by contrast, are often addressed to a more general audience.

6. Lecturers in the Faculty of English include all the professors and

readers, who are senior scholars, and a full cohort of lecturers who are often also teaching fellows of colleges and who give supervision as well as lectures; so that there is much inter-connection of function. Many lecturers will also have published editions or studies in the area of their lecture-subjects, so that their views will be accessible from the printed page (you can look up their names in a library catalogue).

7. At a later stage in the undergraduate's progress certain lecturers will also offer supervision for those following special options, and a director of studies may arrange for an undergraduate with a special project (for example, a dissertation) to be supervised by a fellow of another college who is also a lecturer in the specialised area involved. There will also be small-group seminars in which extended two-way discussion with individual lecturers is part of their function. But all these more advanced arrangements can be ignored in the early stages.

8. The pattern of a lecture course varies according to subject, to the level at which it is pitched and the audience for which it is intended, and to the kind of teaching which it is intended to provide. Different kinds and levels of lecture course suit different needs, and provide different kinds of advantage to those who attend them. Your director of studies will give you advice, especially in the earlier stages; and as you build up your experience of the system you will find these distinctions easier to identify for yourself.

9. Readiness for a particular course, preparation for it and level of commitment for it, are partly determined by the year-group you are in, and partly by aspects specific to you personally. Some courses are announced with an indication of the level at which they are pitched: e.g., suitable for first year students; *or*, presuming no previous knowledge of Chaucer; *or*, classes intended to complement the main course of lectures also being given on this topic; *or*, for candidates preparing for a specialist exam paper in Part II (third year); and so on. These indications are intended as a guide, and they will help you to select courses appropriate to your current skills and needs.

10. Remember that it will not regularly be possible to select lecture courses to match closely with the subject-matter of your concurrent supervisions; there may be some degree of matching, but also you will have to look ahead and follow courses of lectures which will not come into your supervision work until later on. You are now in the business, to some extent at least, of advancing on many fronts all at once, or switching intermittently from one to another at varying levels of concentration. You will find this taxing at first. But as your overall course of studies develops it will take on an intelligible shape and you will make connections that make sense of previously separated components. Truly, this does happen!

11. Remember also that *Notes on Courses* is divided up by different exam papers and sections of the three-year English course, so that you can determine what is specifically intended for your needs and what is pitched to meet needs that lie further ahead. If you want to inspect the full range of lecture courses for all three terms of the current academic year, you can consult the special Lecture-List number of the *Cambridge University Reporter*, which is kept at the Enquiry Desk of the College Library. Your director of studies will have outlined to you what are to be the principal stages of the

current year's work, and this will enable you to exclude from consideration most of the offered lecture courses which lie outside this scope. You do not need to look further ahead than the current year because most lecture courses will be offered again in the following year, or courses covering similar ground, and the following year will be the right time to include these in your programme.

12. At the start of each term the individual undergraduate has to review the schedule of courses for the term ahead and make a selection of courses to reconnoitre and perhaps to follow systematically. To reconnoitre a course means to consider whether the announced topic and course description seems to promise interest or meet a need, in the context of areas where you have not yet worked much or where you will soon need some active information; to ponder recommendations supplied by your director of studies; to weigh one course against the others on offer, in the context of how many hours you have free and how to build a manageable programme; and perhaps to go to the very first lecture, to discover for yourself what are its aims and what it's like. You will soon discover, too, that there are often clashes in the timetable, so that you are sometimes compelled to make hard choices.

13. You also have to determine the level of your commitment to each course that you plan to follow. At the most elemental level you can merely audit a course, that is, attend and listen in, and take notes, but not undertake substantial reading in advance or between the sessions; you might possibly do this to gain a foretaste of a topic area you plan to revisit in more depth at a later stage. With greater commitment, you may plan to read in advance the main texts that will be the core subject-matter of the course; or you may decide to read these texts in detail, and annotate them closely, in advance of the first session.

14. If a course is announced with a title like 'Reading *Paradise Lost*' or 'An Introduction to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*' the lecturer may invite you to read through the work alongside the lectures week by week, taxing yourself to keep up and using the lectures as a pacemaker to this end. Lectures on a text set for special study sometimes proceed section by section with commentary and analysis, so that each week there is a specific portion of text to be prepared in advance. Some specialist lectures presume some developed prior knowledge, others invite intensive commitment to close preparation, especially where the texts are challenging linguistically or in regard to historical context. Other more general, survey-type courses are intended as a general introduction, and may move at a more relaxed pace.

15. To follow through with a chosen set of courses means to select your personal programme for the term and then to commit yourself to regular attendance at the lectures in each individual course which you have selected. Don't regard this commitment as a loose provisional affair. You need to take up the reading and preparation announced by the lecturer at the start and as the course progresses; you need to be punctual for each session and not to miss any of them. You need to take time after each session to assimilate the material and to follow up leads and suggestions. You need to keep the lecture handouts and reading lists carefully and in sequence. Many courses of lectures unfold their larger or more inward purposes only as the sequence

gains its full momentum, and if you abandon the course before it concludes you may have missed much of its point.

16. Building up a personal programme of lectures, fitting in with your commitments to supervisions and classes and the need for time to prepare and write up essays, is a planning task which is quite a serious responsibility, because in the end the choices are yours. None of the Faculty teaching is compulsory, and there is far too much of it for any individual to take on more than a limited selection. To take on too little is to waste opportunity; to take on too much is to head for exhaustion and to reduce the benefits to be gained. You will learn your own capacities by trial and error, but don't underestimate how much you can assimilate if you really try and if you organise your time well. Don't be a butterfly and flit around according to whim or fashion. You may be surprised to find that sometimes your own evaluation of the overall interest of a lecture-series may correspond closely with that of your fellow-students, but that sometimes there may be quite sharp divergences of opinion. Follow your own personal judgement. Also, remember that what is most exciting may not always be what most you need; some material presented in steady and unshowy style may introduce you to information without which fancier footwork will easily fall flat.

17. Practical points. Each course of English Faculty lectures is announced in the *Notes on Courses* and via the Faculty Website as taking place on a certain day at a certain time. If for example the course you are interested in is marked as Fri 12, this means that on each Friday at 12 noon there will be a lecture until the series is concluded (normally through the eight weeks of term). By convention, lectures do not commence in term-time until the first Thursday of term, even if Full Term commences earlier. This means that a lecture set for Thursday or Friday will take place in the first week of term, whereas a lecture set for Tuesday or Wednesday will start in the following week.

18. Nearly all lectures in the Faculty of English take place on the Sidgwick Avenue Site, opposite Newnham College and close to Harvey Court. You pass from the roadway (Sidgwick Avenue) across an ugly car-park and up a laterally extended flight of steps onto a kind of plaza, with the Raised Faculty Building (which contains the English Faculty Library) perched up on stilts beyond. To your right there is a tall neo-brutalist tower which is the Lecture Block. Just outside its two entrance doors you will find a free-standing indicator board, of the kind familiar in grubbier railway stations. The display is changed each day: you look for the lecturer's name in the alphabetical listing, and find under the column for the relevant hour a room number, which is the place that you need to find. It is not usual for either the time or the place to vary after the first session.

19. What happens in a lecture: what does the lecturer do, and what does the individual member of a lecture-audience do in response? A lecturer will usually announce at the start of the first session what is to be the aim of the lectures ahead, which will be highly significant information. Sometimes some previous knowledge of the subject will be expected, sometimes not. Sometimes the course will be systematic in reviewing a wide range of material, sometimes it will be very intensive and concentrated. Sometimes the audience

will be expected to read in preparation for each sessions some more or less extensive material, or to prepare some portion of a text set for special study; sometimes the relevant material will be provided mostly by means of sheets of sample material ('handouts') given to out to those attending and providing the focus for analysis and discussion. There are many variations.

20. A lecturer will usually speak for about 50 minutes without any significant break, so that audience concentration may be quite strongly challenged. There may be different kinds of material, variations in pace, etc., to assist focussed attention. There will also be a structure of argument or discussion, either explicit or implied; an introduction and review of previous material; a statement of questions or topics or aspects to be addressed in the lecture now in progress; a steady movement through the sequence of each stage in turn, following through the text passages presented in the handout; and towards the end an overview and summing up before the topic material for the next lecture is announced. At least, this is a generalised ideal format.

21. Throughout the lecture discussion there will be a vocabulary of description and analysis which implies an overall method or point of view; and a task for the audience is to assimilate this active terminology and understand its implications. It may take several lectures to disclose the range of a method or methods, since some styles of argument are strict whereas others are more mixed and understated. You should find lectures in a specific course easier to follow when you have grasped the habits of structure and the styles of argument which are characteristic for each one.

22. What does an audience-member do during a lecture? There are different kinds and styles of response, depending on the experience and temperament of the auditor and the kind of lectures being attended. But the first task is to pay attention. The evening before, review your material from the previous lecture in the series, and your notes on any reading you have done for the lecture ahead. If you are asked to bring a text with you, have it ready. Arrive on time at the right place: try not to go to a lecture half-asleep or with your mind cluttered up with trivial distractions. If a lecturer is at all hard to hear clearly, or speaks rather too fast for you to catch everything, try to sit near the front where you will not miss too much. If references are written up on the blackboard, copy them down accurately. Try not to scribble too confusedly: confusion on the page betokens confusion in the mind also, and leaving things 'to be sorted out later' can often mean that they won't effectively be sorted out at all.

23. During the lecture you need two general kinds of attention. The first is assimilative; taking in what you hear, understanding the presentation, following the movement and structure, relating this to what you know or have prepared for this session. If text-samples are discussed by means of a handout, follow closely the analysis both in its method and its results: understanding a lecture is harder if you do not have or attain least a provisional grasp of the material on which the lecture is based. As the concluding summary and overview approach, try to anticipate this component by making your own review of the foregoing discussion, clarifying in your mind the central issues and identifying the implications of new information.

24. The second kind of attention, related to the task of assimilation but a

further stage on from it, is critical. You are not a sponge. No opinions come to you with an assumed stamp of approval. You need to respond with alert questioning thoughts all the time; not so obtrusively as to prevent assimilation of the material, but marking points that you will return to for sceptical review or further pondering. Do you agree? Are you well enough informed to be able to decide whether you agree or not? Do the arguments work in the way that the lecturer seems to believe that they do? Are the interpretations of text or context open to other approaches, and what would they be? What are the implications for value-judgement and overall estimation? Remember that you are not required to agree with everything in a course of lectures for the sessions to be highly profitable, not least because they challenge your own opinions and rouse you to internal argument. Not all disagreement is antagonistic or defensive. Often a lecturer will adopt a provocative or alternative position precisely in order to stimulate critical response, or to send you back to first principles.

25. During the session of a lecture and over the connected course of sessions you will need to keep a record of the proceedings, and this is the function of lecture-notes. Keeping notes over a fifty-minute discourse, while you are also listening closely and questioning in your mind, requires stamina and training. You will develop your own style of taking notes, and you will take different kinds of notes in different kinds of lecture. But go prepared, with a folder or suitable notebook and pens you can write fast with; label your notes clearly with lecturer, subject and date, and work out some tabular system of numbered points or sections with sub-headings to help you keep track of the structure. Leave room as you write for later comments or explanations in the margins. If you write notes on the handout sheets also, try to indicate in your main notes where each part of the handout material fitted into the sequence. If there are points that you don't hear correctly or need to check afterwards, flag them up so that they can be found easily. You will for sure get better at all this as you gain experience.

26. A few further specific hints about the methods of practical note-taking. Different styles and kinds of lecture, including whether it's just one talk or part of a developing series, different reasons for being in the audience, different personalities and motivations in the individual listener, all make for differences in method; however, there are some basic features of the process which can be identified. First, you will not of course be able to make anything like a transcript or full record, and so the task is one of summary; and since you may not have a full idea of the lecture's overall purpose and direction, or the direction of a continuing series, until the discussion begins to unfold, you will have to invent a running structure for your notes based on your analysis of where for you the significant material lies or is likely to arise. Second, you have to make priorities in the matter of what you are listening out for: whether it's information, or an overall introductory outline, or detailed reference to specific topics, or a style of argument or developing critical position Some lecturers display a clear structure of presentation, and give advance indication of major themes; others leave the structure implicit, while for yet others the term 'structure' would be an ambitious euphemism.

27. However, an alert and proficient note-taker should be able to find ways to extract a useful record from most kinds of instructive discourse. One

important practical device is the HEADING. This is often a word or phrase which acts as a topic-marker, a rallying-label under which to gather or tabulate related points as if in a list or index of themes. Sometimes the material is presented analytically; sometimes by historical narrative, or a narrative based in the sequence of a particular text or texts (e.g., line-by-line commentary); sometimes by a logic of definition and explanation; but in most cases, if you can locate a distinct heading or sequence of them you should be able to extract the salient points and issues, and to arrange these in an order which generates a summary overview which is itself more or less intelligible, at least to the note-taker. Sometimes you may number or letter the sub-sections in sequence under a particular heading, or you may use bullet-points or coloured marker-pen. Sometimes you can mark shifts or transitions to new material by leaving separator spaces in your note-formats.

28. Remember that you will also concurrently be developing different but related note-taking skills; for example, keeping notes of your own critical response as you read or re-read original text material, or taking notes from perusal of a critical essay or section of a biography or historical survey or other works of literary criticism. In these examples you will not be under the same pressure of time, to catch arguments as they speed past your horizon of attention; but in most cases the underlying methods of analysis and summary will be similar if not quite the same. To practice the specific skills appropriate to selecting effective analytic headings, try in your reading of literary history or works of criticism to observe how chapters and sections are headed, and how these headings work (or, sometimes, don't work) to set out the sequence of what follows. Pay some attention to how an efficient table of contents or book-index works, as a way of flagging up and tracing themes in the main discourse by means of key-words. Mobilise what you are learning about the operation of online library catalogues in the matter of subject-headings, and how a well-aimed internet search can get better quality results via a search engine if the enquiry is shrewdly framed.

29. Try to be accurate if you can in keeping a close record of proper names, dates and titles, and references to sections of literary works on which the lecturer's discussion concentrates, e.g., chapters in novels, act and scene references in plays. Otherwise when you come later to write an essay you may half-recall what seems likely to be a crucial quotation or passage of text but be unable to find it in a hurry. Often you may be able to link a lecturer's oral references to information provided in hand-outs or reading-lists; but if you think that you may have a name or title partly wrong, make it a priority after the lecture to check these features over while you are in a library or close to your own books, and correct your notes accordingly. If you get seriously stuck, you can raise an information query with the lecturer after his next lecture (if you are attending a series), or you can ask your supervisor.

30. Sometimes lecture-notes are best arranged as an outline narrative, following in profile the sequence of the discussion. Sometimes the most apt model is making a map, demonstrating the principal features of an array of topics and the connections between them. Sometimes the sequence is logical development, e.g. from general to particular, from abstract outline to specific cases or illustrative material. Yet again, the ordering device may be classification, setting up lists and families of related genre or descriptive

features or methods of approach. In all these different arrangements the main trick is to listen out for the active words or phrases which are governing and giving shape to the discussion, to home in on these words and capture them in your notes, to mark their significant prominence by capitals or underlining, so that when you scan your own page you can see at a glance the main thread or frame that you have adopted. Sometimes the prominence for you is not the same as the prominence for the lecturer, since your purpose may be to locate a partial theme and concentrate on it because it has special importance to you or for your own purposes. But remember that, by the time you revisit these notes at some later stage, your earlier local purpose may have diminished; and then you may wish that your record had been less selective and more balanced overall.

31. Use the page-layout diagnostically. If a lecture includes what may seem an evident digression or separate point from the main development, you may like to set a rule-lined box around your note, to hold it from becoming entangled with the central exposition; though some lecturers may seem to spend considerable time flitting from one such box to another. Sometimes in laying out your notes you may wish to set aside certain areas within the page-frame (e.g., a broad left or right margin) for hints to yourself like 'N.B. follow this up' or 'look up this passage, sounds important', or critical comments like 'sharp disagreement here with what my supervisor thinks' or 'am I missing the point or does this conclusion contradict itself?'

32. Such reserved space may also provide opportunity for later annotation that you yourself insert on re-reading the original notes; maybe here a different-coloured ink would be visually distinguishing. Or you may incorporate asterisks or side-lining into the body of your notes, serving to identify central pivots in contention or moments of for you potential doubt or hesitation. Medieval readers of manuscript text would often flag up notable passages by drawing into the margin little hands with a pointing finger aimed at the point of special interest (N.B. *not* recommended for modern library books). Occasionally you may find yourself setting out fast summary headings for extended disagreement with the lecturer's discussion, possibly, indeed, the whole argument, and such adversarial commentary may come to crowd right into the main body of your notes; far from rendering the lecture a waste of time for you, it may serve precisely to locate and activate a whole new line of consideration.

33. All these hints and points will sound very abstract to a beginner. Do not be alarmed, because you will quickly build up your skills by on-the-spot practice. As you grow into the habit of taking notes, you will develop your own style and become more confident, more efficient. Sometimes you may find it instructive, after a lecture, to compare your own notes with those taken by a fellow-student from the same lecture, to observe differences of priority and method. At certain lectures you may wish exclusively to concentrate on assimilating the sequence of presentation, and take no notes at all.

34. During the lecture-session itself some lecturers will allow a period at the end for questions, and most are quite willing to respond to a point raised informally after a lecture is concluded. But if there are large points about method or judgement that you cannot resolve, or niggling points of detail,

your next weekly College supervision provides an opportunity to take a second opinion; present your uncertainties to your supervisor and see what ensues. Remember too that striving to formulate the question as clearly as possible in your own mind often brings you a long way towards a clearer view of possible answers. In addition, if you are attending the course of lectures in the company of a fellow-student or students, there is plenty of time later to debate and explore material you have all heard, and to exchange different viewpoints.

35. Make sure, finally, that your daily programme allows you opportunity, after a lecture has ended, for review of your notes, clarification of confused recording and pondering of what the lecture gave you. Re-read the text material, refer back to notes on the previous lecture in the series, take up in your mind the outstanding critical doubts or questions, and try to work them through. Try to do this systematically and as soon as possible after the session, while your impressions are fresh. Some really big questions may come to loom in your mind for quite some time; living with big questions, and keeping them in the clearest focus that you can manage, is central to an active course of study and a strong part of your reason for being here. At the end of the whole lecture course, and probably in the following vacation, you should set aside time to review all the ground you have covered and to consolidate your thoughts as staging-points for more advanced work lying ahead; if your notes and handouts are in good order, they will also be more useful for revision when exams approach.

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