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# THE WORCESTER COLLEGE GUIDE TO SUPERCURRICULARS

Finding and utilising the academic  
resources you need to make a great  
university application

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## What are supercurriculars?

A supercurricular activity is something you pursue outside of your normal schoolwork which is still related to your academic interests. For example, if you're interested in History, you might read a book about the Tudors after school; if you want to study Biology, you might listen to the New Scientist podcast every week.

It's similar to an extracurricular activity like playing a sport or volunteering because you do it in your own time, but it's academic in focus and will usually be aimed at expanding your knowledge about a particular subject.

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## Why are they important?

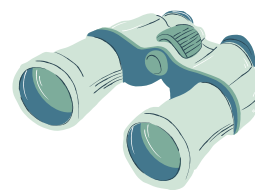
Top universities look for candidates who show genuine subject interest, self-motivation and good critical thinking skills. By seeking out relevant supercurriculars in your spare time and selecting some key examples to include in your application, you can prove to your chosen universities that you tick all of those boxes!

Supercurriculars should also be interesting and challenging in their own right – if you're doing a lot of research about your chosen university subject and finding it very boring, it's a good indication that you may be better suited to studying something else.

## Where can I find them?

There are millions of supercurriculars out there - they could be books, magazines, newspapers, podcasts, documentaries, websites, exhibitions, lectures, work experience, and more. You can make a case for almost any academic resource which has helped you to develop your interest in, or knowledge of, your chosen subject. If you're not sure where to start, here are some general suggestions:

- Supercurricular resource lists made by universities – you can find lists made by Oxford [here](#) and Cambridge [here](#), and you should also check the websites of any other universities you're considering
- Oxford University's [Digital Resource Hub](#)
- [Staircase 12](#), a website run by University College in Oxford which collects supercurricular suggestions by subject group
- Worcester College's [list of suggested supercurriculars for Year 12s](#)
- [The Oxford Very Short Introduction series](#), which consists of short books written on a huge variety of academic topics
- [Oxford University podcasts](#) on over 4000 topics
- Ask your teachers if they can think of any recommendations



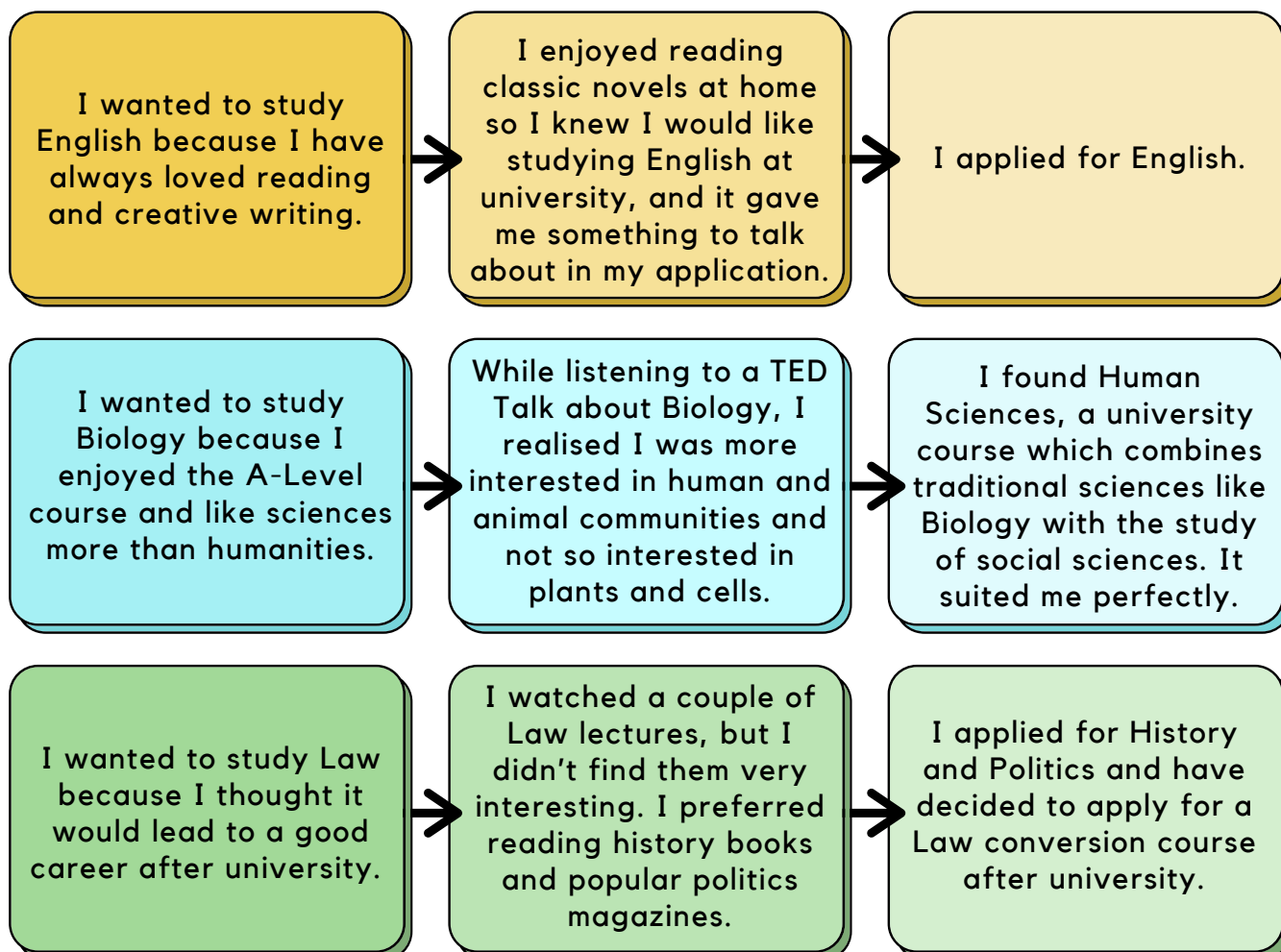
## Supercurriculars can help you to:

- 1** Find out which subject you'd like to study  
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# 1 Find out which subject you'd like to study

It can be tricky to pin down exactly what you'd like to study at university, especially if you have lots of interests ranging across multiple subjects. You can use supercurriculars to investigate different courses and decide which subject (or combination of subjects) you would enjoy. You'll spend a lot of time studying independently at university so try to pick a subject that motivates you to do your own research – supercurriculars should be challenging, but not a chore.

Here are a few examples:



If you want to study something new at university, check out some of these lesser-spotted subjects:

**Biochemistry**, a science subject which uses use molecular methods to investigate, explain and manipulate biological processes

**Archaeology and Anthropology**, a humanities subject studying humankind from the origins of the human species to the present day

**Classics**, a humanities subject covering the literature, history, philosophy, languages and archaeology of the ancient world

**Earth Sciences**, a science subject which combines physics, chemistry and biology with geology, geography and palaeontology

**Materials Science**, a science subject spanning the physics and chemistry of matter, engineering applications and industrial manufacturing processes

**Theology and Religion**, a humanities subject looking at religious traditions and the social/cultural contexts for religious belief and practice

## 2 Expand your knowledge of your subject

Supercurriculars are great for getting to grips with the details of your chosen university subject. They can build on what you've already learned at school, and they can also introduce you to totally new concepts.

Remember that you don't have to look at absolutely everything that could be related to the course. Investigate your subject broadly enough to find the areas you're really interested in, but don't worry about learning tonnes of new information – universities won't expect you to have expert knowledge already. There's no 'magic number' of supercurriculars to consult when you're preparing a university application.

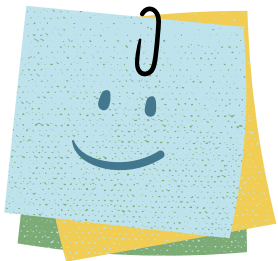
If you're stuck, think about the subjects you're currently studying which might be relevant to your chosen degree course. Which topics do you really enjoy? You could then use terms and keywords from those topics to search big resource hubs and find relevant supercurriculars:

- Search the news for any recent developments in the field
- Search for academic books and articles on Google Scholar
- Search the Very Short Introduction series
- Search the TED Talk archive
- Search the Oxford University podcast archive
- Search the In Our Time archive

### 3 Develop your analysis and critical thinking skills

It's a good idea to keep a record of all of your supercurriculars – you'll find some more guidance about logging your work at the end of this booklet. You should also try to engage critically with the material you use. This will help you to understand your subject in a broader and more analytical sense, and it will also be really useful when you need to demonstrate your critical thinking skills to a top university. Here are a few ways to get started:

Jot down a few evaluative thoughts about each resource as soon as you've finished it. What did you like or dislike about it? What was the main argument – did you agree or disagree? What evidence was used? What other resources could you look at to corroborate or contradict this resource?



Make links and comparisons between supercurriculars. Can you think of any other resources within the same genre, or which cover the same topic? Which ones disagree? Which ones take a different approach? You could also pursue one particular resource further – for example, if you read a book you really like, try to find more books written by the same author.



**Start discussions.** You could start a discussion group at school for students who will be applying for a similar course, or ask your friends and family for help. It can be helpful to share a short resource with somebody else, like a podcast episode or a magazine article, and then talk about it together.



**Match your supercurriculars to the selection criteria for your course.** Find the selection criteria for your course online, and try to match each item on the list to a resource you've used. You may find this particularly useful when you're about to write your personal statement; it will ensure that each resource you mention is linked to the course and highlight any gaps where you may need to look at a few more supercurriculars.

**Explore widely, but when it comes to making your application, be selective.** You don't have to list every resource you've ever used in your personal statement, as we'll see in the next section! You should choose the ones which have had the greatest impact on you and which best illustrate your suitability for the course. To identify those resources, take a look back at your supercurricular log and highlight the 5 or 6 resources which you think have had the greatest impact on your understanding of, or enthusiasm for, your subject.



## 4 Write a great personal statement

Most students will say in their personal statements that they are very interested in the subject they have chosen to study at university. However, not everybody will be able to substantiate this claim with evidence. When you can prove your subject interest using few well-chosen supercurriculars, you show universities that you've done your research.

This doesn't mean that you have to stuff your personal statement with every supercurricular you can find – it's better to focus on a handful of resources than to reference hundreds. Select a few and see if you can construct a compelling narrative for your personal statement which utilises these supercurriculars to clearly illustrate why you like your chosen university subject and would be well suited to studying it.

UK universities usually focus on academic activities because they illustrate your subject interest and your aptitude for university study. For applications to Oxford and Cambridge, we generally recommend that your personal statement is around 80% academic (including your supercurriculars), and no more than 20% extracurricular. If you do want to include a few extracurriculars, it's helpful if you can link them to university study in some way – for example, if you're applying for a Chemistry course and you're also the captain of the football team, you might say that football has taught you key teamwork skills which you could put to good use in a university lab.

Here are a few examples of how supercurriculars have been used in successful personal statements:

"I found watching Ian Stewart's "Earth: The Power of the Planet", "Rise of the Continents" and "Deep Earth" documentaries useful for gathering an overview of the most significant geological processes and climatic variations which have occurred during Earth's history. Hoping to develop a more detailed insight into Earth's history, I have read "The Goldilock's Planet" which introduced me to climate feedback mechanisms such as the ice-albedo effect. The Earth being as massive and complex as it is, I was amazed that it can be viewed as a system in this way." (Earth Sciences)

"In Religious Studies, the analysis of philosophy and ethics provides opportunities for intellectual discussion. I have read beyond the specification, for example, by researching the philosophy of Kant, Mackie and Epicurus which I find challenging and captivating. Attending a lecture by Dr Vardy offered opportunities for a robust discussion about morality and Kantian ethics, while reading Blackburn's "Think" provided an introduction to philosophical arguments and their criticisms. I am drawn to his analysis of compatibilism in which he describes the brain in software terms, made up of modules which allow for a logical choice of actions." (Philosophy, Politics and Economics)

"I was further inspired when I attended the lecture 'Language through Deaf eyes', in which Prof. Bencie Woll outlined the history of sign languages and what we can learn from them. This propelled me to read Prof. Woll's book 'The Linguistics of British Sign Language' which gave me a fantastic insight into a world about which, as a member of the hearing community, I knew very little. What struck me the most was the theory that as humans primarily perceive the world visually, sign languages have greater potential to interpret and express our experiences than a spoken language. From this, I considered the impact that language might have, not only on the way we think, but on our ability to do so." (German and Linguistics)

# Our top tips for personal statements

1

**Give yourself plenty of time.** First drafts are rarely perfect, and you will probably need to work on your personal statement over a period of weeks or months to make sure you're happy with it. It's a good idea to start thinking seriously about your personal statement in the summer holidays before you plan to apply to university.

2

**Make sure your punctuation, spelling and grammar are correct.** A typo here or there won't make a huge difference, but universities will generally want to see that your personal statement has been carefully written. Proofread your statement before you submit it, and ask others to check it too.

3

**Don't lie – universities can tell!** If you mention a supercurricular activity in your application, make sure that you have actually looked at it so you can write about it honestly. Plus, if you're applying to a university which uses interviews as part of its selection process, you might be asked to talk about what you've written; your personal statement is therefore a valuable opportunity to tell your interviewers about topics you'd really like to discuss.

4

**Avoid cliches and overused phrases.** Sometimes they are unavoidable, but try to express your thoughts in your own words as much as possible - your statement should be personal to you, after all. Instead of telling your chosen universities how "fascinated" or "intoxicated" you are by your subject, focus on why you feel that way: how do you know you are interested in this subject, and what have you done outside of your regular schoolwork to pursue that interest?

5

**Maintain a clear and professional tone.** Students are often tempted to write 'unique' personal statements which include poems or secret codes, but it's better to avoid gimmicks. Your interests and skills will come across best when you're writing in a clear, straightforward way.

6

**Don't rely on your thesaurus - succinct language is best.** You don't have to include every long word you can think of to impress admitting tutors. It's your personal statement, so write like yourself!

7

**Avoid listing everything you've ever done.** Instead, focus on analysing your most significant engagements with your subject. While we encourage you to explore your subject as widely and deeply as you can by pursuing lots of supercurriculars, it's likely that most of them won't make the cut for your personal statement. You don't want to use up precious characters by throwing in random resources just for the sake of it, especially if some of those resources are barely related to your chosen subject or your aptitude for university study. Universities want to see that you can select evidence wisely and use it to construct a tightly-focused narrative.

8

**Everything should have a clear, logical reason for being there.** If you're applying for Philosophy & Theology but you still want to talk about a Maths Olympiad competition you participated in, it's a good idea to explain how that experience is relevant to your course - maybe it's taught you how to communicate clearly with others, or given you an interesting insight into the similarities between maths and philosophy.

9

**Don't worry about including examples from different universities.** It's perfectly legitimate to mention a supercurricular activity you have completed with one university, such as a university summer school you attended or a series of public lectures you watched, even if you're applying to different universities.

10

**Proofread in a variety of contexts.** You'll end up reading your personal statement countless times, but remember to read it in different ways, too - try reading it aloud, or from the bottom paragraph to the top. You should ask a few people you trust to proofread it, like teachers or relatives. Don't show it to everybody you know, though, as you may get lots of conflicting opinions back!

## 5 Express your subject interest at interview

If you are invited to an interview at Oxford or Cambridge, it's likely that you will be asked some challenging questions about your subject which you haven't thought about before. You may also be asked about some familiar elements of your subject, such as the resources you've mentioned in your personal statement or the content you're covering in your current qualifications. This is another reason to think carefully about the resources you mention in your personal statement – it could form the basis of a discussion at interview, so it's a good idea to include the resources and topics that you would really like to talk about.

You can find some of Oxford's mock interview questions [here](#). You may also be interested in checking out the university's [Oxplore questions](#) – find a question you like and see if you can think of a few supercurriculars you've used which could help you to answer it. If you can't think of anything, Oxplore will suggest a few supercurriculars you could consult to find out more.

You can find more general advice about the interview process in the university's [2021 Interviews Guide](#).



# How to log your supercurriculars

Try to keep a detailed record of the supercurriculars you look at – it's a lot easier to write a personal statement if the resources you want to reference are right at your fingertips.

You should **make a note of basic identifying details** so you can come back to a resource later if needed. For example, if you've read an interesting magazine article, note down the title of the article, the author, the name of the magazine, and the issue you found it in. You don't need to keep detailed notes unless you find it helpful, but you should leave yourself enough clues to jog your memory down the line.

Next, try to **analyse and evaluate resources** as you go – flick back to the critical thinking and analysis section of this booklet for ideas. It's helpful to jot down evaluative thoughts like the arguments you find particularly interesting, the evidence you think is convincing or unconvincing, and any ideas you want to pursue further whilst you're using the resource or soon afterwards.

Finally, after you've looked at a few resources, you can start to **make comparisons and contrasts**. Look for common themes or ideas which interest you; for example, if you're applying for Physics, you might link an astrophysics module in the A-Level course to a documentary you watched about black holes, and then to a podcast series made by leading scientists in the field.

Here's an example of a supercurricular log entry for a Politics or Law applicant:

**Resource:** "A Very Short Introduction to Human Rights" by Andrew Clapham

**Resource type:** Book

**Brief summary:** This book introduces the concept of human rights and how they have developed over time.

**I learned...** that human rights are a special, narrow category of rights, so when we talk about them, we are not just talking about all the rights that human beings may have. They were elevated to an international level after the Second World War so even though nation states make their own laws, they can be scrutinised from the outside and held to a higher standard on human rights issues.

**I agreed with...** the author's judgement that international organisations could have been more effective in upholding human rights. I agree because I can think of a few recent examples of human rights violations which have not been challenged by the international community. I would like to pursue this further by finding out more about the UN's approach to human rights violations since 1948.

**I disagreed with...** the British press and politicians in Chapter 1 who criticised human rights for putting too much power in the courts and threatening national security. I disagree because I think human rights exist to protect everybody. I also conducted some further research on the Amnesty website and learned that the Human Rights Act did not transfer huge law-making powers to the courts.

**I would like to find out more about...** the backlash against human rights in recent years, such as politicians criticising the European Court of Human Rights during the Brexit campaign. The author referenced a book by Susan Marks which I could read to learn more about this. I also want to find some podcast series about current human rights issues.

**I could link this resource to...**

- The module in my Politics A-Level course about the judiciary and the role of courts in a democracy
- A magazine article I read in the New Statesman about the difficulties of international law-making
- Some posts I've read on a popular Law blog about the UK's approach to human rights
- The newspaper articles I've read recently about international human rights violations



# EVER WANTED TO KNOW...

...how urban centres in Britain have changed over the past 100 years?

...what forces would be acting on a frog riding a skateboard?

...how we can use linguistics to understand what it means to be a Spanish speaker?

...what spaghetti sauce could teach us about economics?

...what happens when a large meteorite impacts on Earth?

...what one of the oldest board games in the world looks like?

...where you can read thousands of classic novels for free?

...how to solve P vs. NP, a mathematical problem so difficult there's a £1m prize for the correct answer?



This guide was produced by Worcester College, Oxford in 2021. Please email us at [admissions@worc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:admissions@worc.ox.ac.uk) with any queries.