

**Cambridge Sociology Student Guidebook**

*Written by students, for students*

**2017-18**

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## Section 1: introduction

### Hello!

First up, welcome to the wonderful world of sociology at Cambridge! This guidebook is (hopefully!) a treasure-trove of tips, help and support on doing sociology at Cambridge, written by current final year students. It's a chance to offer some informal advice on the basis of our own experience as students, to answer some frequently asked questions, and to put to rest some common worries. Although it's aimed at those doing the sociology paper as part of first-year HSPS, a lot of the tips and ideas in this document apply to papers across the whole HSPS course.

There is no 'right way' to do a Cambridge degree and no gospel-like laws for getting the most out of it. So the ideas in this document are inevitably based on just a few individuals' experiences. If you find something doesn't work for you, don't be afraid to reject it! But we wanted to at least try to share some of our experiences, as we remember so well what it feels like to be a fresher, bewildered by the baffling world of Cambridge, and we also remember how important the words of older students were in those confusing early days.

### Don't Panic.

So, chances are you're in your first couples of weeks here, you're panicking because you've been set your first essay, and that reading list looks utterly insurmountable. Maybe you've opened your first book and spent 56 minutes of the last hour googling word definitions. You're probably feeling something like this:



First of all, in the inspiring words of Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, "DON'T PANIC". Practically every student feels like this when they first begin. Your first essay is inevitably something you will look back on with a mixture of humour and nostalgia. It is not expected to be a work of astonishing beauty and insight, but rather something that can be used as a starting point.

Don't forget that your fellow freshers in college and across your course are all feeling exactly the same, no matter how confident and calm they seem to be. You're all exhausted from freshers week and the astonishingly draining process of smiling manically at every person you meet and asking them, as you have asked 555 other people with a kind of interrogation-like invariability, 'What's your name? What do you study? Where are you from? Where are you living?'. Everyone thinks that everyone else they meet is probably a genius and any day now they are going to get a letter telling them their university offer was all a big administrative mistake. Neither of these things are true. You got here, you deserve to be here, and everyone is in the same boat.

One of the great things about HSPS is that while, of course, people have different knowledge bases, the course '*assumes no prior knowledge*'. Lots of people come to Cambridge having never studied any of the HSPS subjects before and sociology - being a relatively rare subject at A level (or equivalent) - is certainly new to most. You'll even be forgiven for not knowing what sociology actually is (I certainly didn't). Basically, any important gaps in your knowledge will be filled in time - you're at no disadvantage. Everyone brings their own unique set of interests and ways of thinking to the table. That's much more important than 'facts'.

Finally, whatever you might be thinking, those teaching you will *not* make a lasting judgement about you on the basis of that first essay. They are used to watching people transform radically over the course of their time here and most of them understand very well the pressures and anxieties that students face, especially in the early days. The following sections will cover a load of useful areas including supervisions, lectures, essay-writing, reading lists, exams and welfare. We hope you find it useful!



## Section 2: supervisions

### What are supervisions?

Supervisions, as you may have gathered by now, are small group meetings, usually of around two or three students (often with other HSPS students from your college) and one 'supervisor' - an academic or PhD student from the sociology department with understanding of a particular subject area of the course. The usual format (though some supervisors do it differently) is to write an essay chosen from a list of suggested topics on the 'paper guide' provided by the department. The first year paper in sociology is called *SOC1: an introduction to sociology* and the guide can be found [here](#).



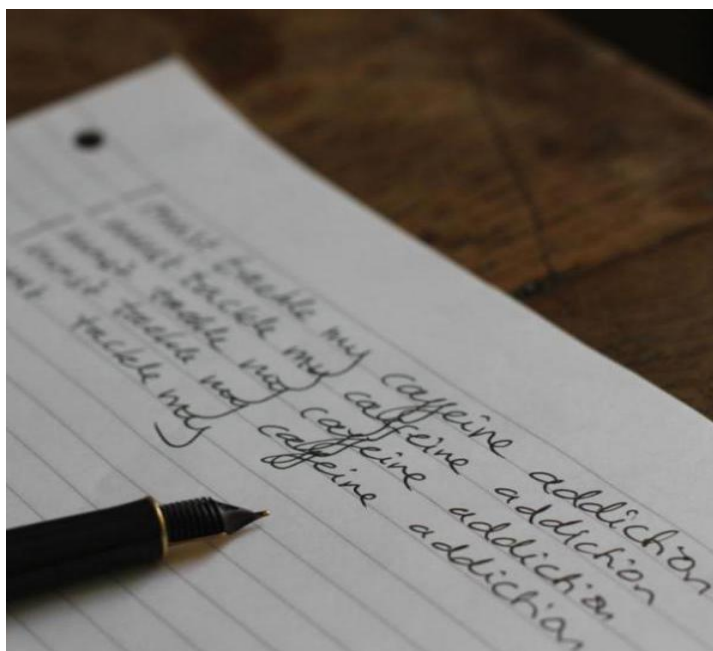
### Supervision topics

In general, your first essay question is chosen for you by your supervisor and they'll get in touch by email. As you progress through your degree, you become more self-directed when it comes to topics. But in the early days, to make things easier for you when you're just finding your feet, your supervisor helps guide essay topic choices. If, as term progresses, you are particularly interested in a topic (or particularly keen to avoid one!) you can always chat to your supervisor and they should try

to incorporate your preferences. Especially further into the year, supervisors usually don't mind too much about shifting their groups of supervisees around according to topic preference. At the end of the day, this is *your* degree, and it's important that you get to explore the topics you're most excited about. At the same time, it's worth bearing in mind some logistical limitations, so try to be understanding if a supervisor is struggling to meet your every request!

## Essay deadlines

The same approach goes for adjusting deadlines. For the first essay, your supervisor will set a submission deadline and it's probably good to try to get it in on time, even if you feel it's not an example of your best work. Time is often pressured at Cambridge - it's a busy place with short terms, and students often feel they have to hand in work they're not totally happy with. Nevertheless, now and then we all find ourselves in the midst of a diary-nightmare and realise there is no way we are going to get an essay in on time, even if we don't sleep for 48 hours (don't do this), even if we drink excessive amounts of caffeine (don't do this either), even if we bar our own access to Netflix (definitely don't do this).



Diary nightmares are especially common among freshers, as you're probably having to get used to a very different working approach from school - one that is much more self-directed. Supervisors *do* understand this, and so long as you can demonstrate to them that the reason you're not handing your essay in on time isn't just because you decided to go out five nights in a row, or to watch every Harry Potter film back to back, but because you genuinely - for all sorts of reasons - need a bit more time to write an essay, they should understand.

People get very nervous about missing deadlines, but at the end of the day, part of being at University is about being treated as an adult. Rather than being your 'teachers', your supervisors are in many ways your academic colleagues, working *alongside* you on your university journey; if you're professional and respectful about the way you approach them when you need an extension or extra help, then they should respond to you with equal respect and understanding.

One big problem students sometimes encounter in their first year is a lack of coordination between supervisors of their different papers. Supervisors from different departments don't necessarily talk to one another about the students that they share and may therefore, unintentionally, end up setting you deadlines that clash with others. This can be very frustrating. Students sometimes report having deadlines all bunched up together in a single week, rather than spread evenly across the term. If this happens, you are not expected to bust your guts to meet those deadlines. Just email your supervisor(s) and explain what's happened, and ask if it's possible to reschedule. If you get stuck, or struggle to get in contact with them, your first port of call is your Director of Studies (DoS), who should be able to help you out with any academic issues arising. As with topic choices, as you progress through your degree, you get more freedom over your deadlines; a lot of second years and most third years organise their supervision topics and deadlines themselves.

## What is the point of supervision essays?

It's important to remember that supervision essays are meant to be a *work in progress*. Obviously an essay should be complete - that is, has an introduction, an argument and a conclusion - except in special circumstances, but it by no means needs to be something you feel is 'finished' in the sense of 'needs no more work done on it ever'. You're not expected to rewrite your essays after a supervision, but the essay is meant to be something which can provide a springboard for discussion in supervisions and for your further exploration of the topic. It also provides something you can come back to at the end of the year in the run up to exams and expand upon on the basis of your supervision input, wider reading, and anything else you've learned over the course of the year. Basically, it's a 'first stab' at a new issue, which provides a foundation on which to build. Section 3 goes over the process of essay-writing in a bit more detail.

## Supervision styles and approaches

When it comes to the supervision itself, you'll find that different supervisors have different approaches and these are affected in turn by you and your fellow supervisees and how you work best. Supervisors are sometimes new to the job and just as worried as you are about how they will go. Ultimately, supervisions are quite *unintimidating*. They're not designed as an opportunity to put you under the spotlight and fire questions at you. They should just be a chance to chat about an interesting subject with other people - try to relax and enjoy it!



The most important thing to remember is that supervisions are *for you*; they should be run so that you get the most out of them for the kind of person and learner you are. If you've got particular questions or areas you'd like to explore, tell your supervisor on the day or even in advance, and they'll try to make sure they cater to your interests as far as possible - as well as to those of your fellow supervisees. Again, if - after you've given it a chance - you feel a particular supervision style really isn't working well for you, try going to your DoS and chatting through possible solutions.

## How many essays should I write?

In HSPS you take four 'papers' (like modules) per year. In first year, you take four introductory papers on a range of social science disciplines - if you're reading this guide, you've probably chosen sociology as one of those four. For each paper you will sit a three hour exam at the end of the year, in which you answer three questions from a list. The

questions you answer will be related to the essays you have written for supervisions in the first two terms of the year (the third term is mostly spent preparing for the exams).

The sociology department recommends that students write between four and six essays per paper over the course of the first two terms. This equates to two or three essays per paper, per term. However, regardless of how many essays you choose to write, you will have six *supervisions* per paper per term (are you keeping up?).

It's your supervisor's responsibility to discuss with you and your fellow supervisees what will work best in terms of use of supervision time. Some students, instead of writing an essay for each of the six supervisions, prefer to do presentations or extra reading with notes for a discussion. There is more than one way to explore a topic and more than one way to prepare for an exam, so if you find that essays are not the most useful way that you can explore your ideas, there is always the option to use one or two of your six supervisions in these alternative ways.

When it comes to the exam, most students prepare in depth four or five of the topics they have explored over the course of the year. Some prepare six to give them greater choice in the exam, though it's worth bearing in mind your time-limitations for revision, and your memory capacity. It's up to you to decide over the course of the year how many essays you would prefer to write and how you choose to revise the various topics covered; your supervisors and DoS should be happy to chat through this decision with you if you are unsure.

### **What to do when there are problems**

Remember that your supervisor should always be happy to answer questions and concerns - however ridiculous you might think those questions and concerns are - by email. They are - like you - busy people with their own work and research commitments, so they may not be able to answer straight away. However, the department has a guideline that supervisors should respond to students within three days. If you don't hear back within this time, try dropping them another email checking that they received your first one. If you still don't hear back, contact your DoS.

You should also feel free to contact your DoS if you have any concerns about your supervisor at any time - if you feel they are behaving unfairly, or have any problems at all in your working relationship. Your DoS is there to support you, but they can't always do that if you don't draw their attention to specific problems arising.



## Section 3: writing essays

Essays are expected to be around 1,500 to 2,000 words. It may sound like a lot, but you'll soon find that making a detailed and coherent argument out of four or five A4 pages is actually quite a challenge! There is no single way to write a good essay and - as with many social sciences - a lot of sociology is about subjective interpretation. Nonetheless, there are some sure-fire ways to make essay-writing as enjoyable and pain-free as possible.

### Accessing resources

When you write an essay you'll need to find the suggested reading list provided in the paper guide. A reading list will usually contain a mixture of online resources like journal articles and Ebooks, and physical books which can be got out of the libraries. You'll find most of the books you need for sociology in the SPS library beside the department down Free School Lane in the centre of town. The staff there are incredibly friendly and helpful, so you're in safe hands. They even give out free biscuits in exam term!



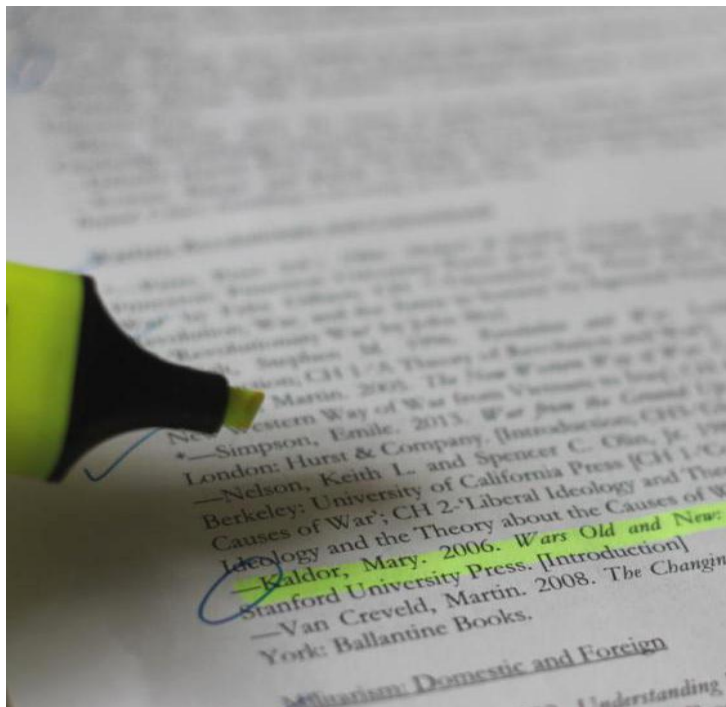
There are multiple copies of most of the books in the SPS library so you shouldn't have too much trouble getting hold of a text, and if you do find they're clean out, the [Librarysearch](#) website can show you all the locations where a book can be found in the university. If you're looking for extra resources on a particular issue, or extra reading later in the year, your supervisors and lecturers are usually happy to point you in the right direction and make recommendations. [Google Scholar](#) is also a really useful resource where you can search for academic

resources by searching for keywords. Finally, if you can't access a book or find an Ebook version online, [Google Books](#) often has parts of books - such as selected chapters - available to read for free.

## Reading lists

When you first get your first reading list, your heart rate is likely to jump through the roof. A lot of the time, the people constructing reading lists provide helpful guidance on what it's really fundamental to read to get a grasp of the topic, and what is extra or more supplementary. Often, they will also provide page numbers or chapter references.

Sometimes, however, the people constructing reading lists have a somewhat unrealistic expectation of how much it's possible to read in the space of a few days. When you do find yourself in the ridiculous position of encountering a reading list that cites multiple entire books without any indication of chapters or pages to read, don't feel you're expected to read them cover to cover. If it has an introduction and conclusion chapter, read those and it's likely to give you the gist of the arguments. Alternatively, check the contents page or index for sections or chapters that are especially relevant. Some books also have summaries, reviews, or commentaries online. Another really good way of tackling reading lists is to split the workload with other people doing the same topic. Sharing notes and ideas not only helps consolidate your learning, it also makes life much, much easier.



You will find you get much faster at reading and condensing arguments as you progress through your degree. However, it's worth remembering that different people will always read at different speeds and your ability to speed-read has nothing to do with how capable you are. Some people are just slow readers, and others have special educational needs that make fast reading incredibly difficult. You have to figure out a system that works best for you, and don't panic when you meet that one person in a thousand who

has somehow sped through the entire reading list. It doesn't necessarily mean they've written a better essay. What matters is that you've got a flavour of the available literature on a topic and - importantly - have allowed yourself enough time to consolidate your ideas from that reading; sometimes it's better to read less and give yourself more time to think and write.

## Writing the essay

Again, there is no single way to write an essay. It's always good to take supervisor feedback seriously, but sometimes those giving feedback make judgements about writing-style or preference that are not universally agreed upon. Take suggestions on board, but don't be afraid to embrace your own style if you find that an approach is not working for you.

The university and the faculty libraries have lots of guidance on essay-writing - which you can ask them about or find on their websites. Some colleges run workshops or have academics who provide support for essay-writing - your DoS should be able to point you in the right direction. This is especially useful for students who have taken a gap year and might feel a little out of the loop on academic writing (I certainly felt like this) or for those whose A levels (or equivalent qualifications) were predominantly non-essay based subjects.

Finally, it's always good to share essays with friends taking the course to get a sense of their approaches. You can sometimes learn as much from your fellow students as from the university academics. Chatting through an issue that you're finding overwhelmingly confusing with a friend can have wondrous results, because you can be sure they won't judge you while you babble out loud, trying desperately to get your head around neo-anti-foundationalism-transcendentalism (this isn't an actual thing. I made it up. But there are some real 'isms' that are almost as ridiculous. Don't let them intimidate you. They're never as horrifying as they seem.)

## Section 4: lectures



One thing many students get confused about early on is the relationship between lectures and the essays we write for supervisions. I remember sitting through every lecture for most of first year, panicking to myself as I wondered how on earth I was going to get through all this material. The great news is: you're not *meant* to get through all that material. Remember earlier when we talked about topics you will write essays on or explore in supervisions? Those topics will generally match up to one or two lectures in the series. The lecture series is like a menu of the available options for topics in the paper.

It's good to go to as many lectures as you can, so you can get a broad perspective of sociological ideas (and many topics interlink with each other in interesting ways), and because someone has put time and energy into preparing them. However, at the same time, because many of the lectures will be on topics you will *not* be exploring in depth for a supervision, you should treat them like interesting talks rather than spoken gospel, every scrap of which you should meticulously note down: take what you can from them, make notes on things that interest you, and then leave it at that.

*NB: you are not normally expected to do reading preparation for lectures.* This is largely because, a lot of the time, your lectures and the topics you do for supervisions will not be neatly synchronised: sometimes you may go to a lecture in advance of your supervision topic, and may even be inspired by a particular lecture to explore a topic for a supervision, but at other times a lecture on your topic of choice may come after you've already written an essay / explored the topic in the supervision. So when a lecture crops up in your timetable, it won't necessarily neatly correspond to the reading and work you are doing at that time.

## Section 5: the sociology department

In spite of the slightly intimidating industrial elevator which faces you when you walk through the door, the sociology department is a very friendly place. They are always keen to incorporate student ideas for making the academic experience better, and you should have one or two student representatives (their names and email addresses will be advertised on the department notice board) who attend departmental meetings and take students concerns and ideas to the management team a couple of times a term.

The department is very accommodating when it comes to hosting student events, such as talks, discussions, seminars and film nights. Last year there were two film series, one run by academics from the department in relation to different papers offered across all three year-groups, and one run by students, screening films made by Asian directors. The department often provides drinks and snacks free of charge at these events, which is pretty marvellous.

The department also hosts multiple lunchtime seminars and talks with speakers from Universities from all over the world, which they advertise on noticeboards and the email mailing list. So there's plenty of interesting stuff to get your teeth into outside of the specific content of the papers you're taking.

Academics in the sociology department are usually carrying out fascinating research of their own above and beyond their teaching commitments, so getting to know them is an incredibly valuable chance to engage with the academic community of the university. Like



most academics, they are a fairly wacky and wonderful bunch, and are often very happy to help students out. The department is keen to encourage students thinking of writing a dissertation in third year to consider researching an issue relating to the work of an academic in the department. This would give you the amazing opportunity to be supervised by someone right at the top of their field. So although it's far too early to be worrying about dissertations, it's worth keeping an eye and ear out for what different academics in the department are working on, in case it's something that you also find interesting.

Finally, the department groups its research priorities into five [‘research clusters’](#), which are: gender, reproduction and family life; media, culture and new technologies, public health and biomedicine; social theory; economic and political sociology. Undergraduates are usually welcome to attend and contribute to the meetings and discussions of these research groups. There are also regular reading groups relating to these topics - as well as one relating to race and ethnicity - which students are also welcome to attend.

## Section 6: exams

Exams is one of those words that freshers murmur throughout first term, in hushed and horrified tones, as though they represent the coming of the apocalypse. It's important to cut exams down to size. Here are some mantras you need to begin learning by heart until you are not only saying but believing them: exams grades do not define you - they represent neither your academic ability, nor your time at Cambridge as a whole.

I'm not going to tell you not to bother or care about exams. Aspects of doing well in exams are truly admirable: passion for your subject, hard work, going the extra mile. But lots of people who fulfil all of those criteria still don't 'do well' in exams, and it's important not to start predicating your sense of worth upon a little number on a piece of paper. So engage with the material you've explored throughout the year, do justice to yourself and the issues you're exploring, but remember you are playing a game that is imperfect. Remember, also, that your health - both mental and physical - is infinitely more important.

The advice below is by no means exhaustive, but hopefully provides a few tips and pointers to get you started on exams. Do remember that everyone is in the same boat in the sense of being totally new to the Cambridge system, and that first year is an opportunity to stumble your way through by a process of trial and error - to discover what works for you and make mistakes so you can learn for future years.

### How it all works: grades and exam format

Sometimes people get confused about how grades work at Cambridge, because they operate a little differently to some universities. For each year of exams in HSPS you will receive an overall mark out of 100, which is the mean of the mark out of 100 that you receive for each of the four papers you sit. That mark out of 100 will be assigned a 'class' ranging from a First to a Third; in general 40-49 is a Third, 50-59 a 2:2, 60-69 a 2:1 and anything over 70 a First. However, there are certain other criteria, related to how many of your papers individually received a given mark, to avoid situations where a very high or low mark in a single paper drags the mean radically up or down, or to deal with 'marginal' cases such as where someone's average is, say, 69.5.

On results day you will receive your overall mark, and a breakdown of each paper, by logging onto your student account on the Cambridge Student Information System (**CamSIS**). But each year's overall mark is standalone - there is no carry-over to the next year. This means that, technically, you graduate with three separate marks and no overall grade for your entire time at Cambridge. However, because of the way CVs and job applications (and other universities) tend to operate, people have come to refer to their third year mark as the 'overall grade' that they graduate with. Are you with me so far?!

For your sociology paper in first year you will sit one three hour exam in which you will need to write three essays from a list. The list will correspond roughly to topics that have been covered in the lecture series, and four, five or six of which you will have written about (though most likely only partially) for supervision essays. In your second and third years the exams sometimes work differently - for example, writing four essays in three hours - but the three-essay, three-hour format is followed in most social science exams.

## Preparing and revising

The third term of the Cambridge year is usually referred to as 'exam term'. It begins late April after the Easter holidays, and most exams occur in late May and early June. It's so important that you get a break over Easter, and don't try to spend all of it beavering away in preparation. Coming back refreshed and rested is one of the best forms of preparation there is. Having said this, you might want to spend some of the holidays at least figuring out how you are going to tackle revision, or making a small start on certain areas.

For many people, a significant element of exam term is expanding their knowledge through extra reading and thinking, rather than memorising stuff they've done over the course of the year only. So a really good place to start is the reading lists for the topics you wrote about for supervision essays. Very few people manage to plough through entire reading lists in the course of the year and it's likely there's a lot of stuff you didn't find time to look at. Don't overburden yourself with pages-long lists of texts - you'll only end up panicking and sliding into a Netflix-fueled period of total denial. You want to aim for *partial* denial over Easter, so you can relax but still get a few things done. Aim to select two or three extra things to read for each topic which can broaden your understanding and build on what you know already.

This is a good point at which to see if anyone else at your college also taking the sociology paper - or anyone else you know at the university more broadly - would like to share this task, by reading different texts to you and then exchanging notes. If you want to go the extra mile, you could try searching Google Scholar or asking your supervisor to help you find something a little off the beaten track which isn't on the reading list - or find an angle on the topic which relates specifically to your interests. Going into exam term having done a little extra reading or having compiled lists of what you can realistically aim to achieve gives you a nice head-start.

## Consolidating material

When it comes to consolidating stuff for revision, there are a number of sources to explore:

- ❖ **Your notes** on various books or essays from over the course of the year.
- ❖ **Your supervision essays** - as well as those of your fellow students.
- ❖ **Your supervisors.** You will probably have a revision supervision or two throughout exam term for each paper, in which you can bombard your supervisor with manic, confused questions - this is a good chance to clarify and consolidate material with their help.
- ❖ **Lectures and lecturers.** Some lecturers put their slides (if they have used Powerpoint) or their handouts/notes online either on CamTools or Moodle, so you can come back to them and read them through (they are unlikely to be fresh in your memory several months down the line!). Lecturers are usually fairly responsive to email in exam term as well, so if there is something your supervisor can't help you with, or you have a more general question about the structure of the paper and exam, they are more than happy to help.
- ❖ **Past papers and examiners' reports.** These are normally available through Moodle or Camtools, and are a useful reference point for approaching your exam preparation. Try not to get too worried by examiners' reports - they often do this disconcerting thing where they cite those who have written the 'best answers' and then attribute to them some astonishing act such as 'flawlessly combining literary criticism with philosophy' (as

a friend studying English Literature once found in an examiner's report). Such references to perfection are - somewhat unsurprisingly - incredibly daunting, and often rather unrealistic. A 'good' exam essay is rarely a work of art, or something you would be proud to have people read, let alone 'flawless'!! Remember that your idea of quality is likely to set the bar incredibly high, and that exams are rarely an environment in which people are able to show their best work. Readjust your expectations of yourself in line with achievable and reasonable goals, and remember that *you are human*.

- ❖ **Older students in your college.** Hopefully you will have been introduced to some of the 2nd or even 3rd year students taking HSPS in your college and they will remember well the experience of being a Fresher. They are often more than willing to share notes and tips - so be sure to get in touch with them if this will help you.

## Familiarising and memorising

When it comes to 'revising' in the more literal sense of familiarising and memorising, people engage in an astonishingly varied range of approaches. Try not to be put off by others' doing it differently to you - there is no golden formula. Some people get really into mini whiteboards, others like to draw intricate mind-maps, and some just love highlighter pens. I'm sure there's someone out there who revises entirely in rhyming couplets.

It can be incredibly useful to share parts of the revision process with others. Over the course of my time at Cambridge I have been a member of countless Dropbox folders and Facebook groups designed to share links to events or online resources relating to the course, notes, supervision essays, questions, frustrations etc etc. Meeting up in person to talk things through over coffee also has remarkable effects - verbalising your concerns or confusions rather than mulling them over via your internal monologue forces your brain to articulate the issues in a totally different format, and you'll often surprise yourself when you have to speak aloud.

But really, with revision, it's whatever works for you. Though it is good to work out early on how you will divide up your time. I'm not talking about meticulously planning out every minute of your day on Microsoft Excel. Rather, figuring out what's realistic in the time you have: roughly, how much of exam term will you spend reading extra material, how much consolidating notes, how much memorising, how much writing practice questions etc. This quite simply wards off time-related panic - you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that you have divided up your time, and so long as you roughly follow your plan, it's going to be ok (and it's going to be okay anyway because, let's face it, whatever you might tell yourself, the sky is *not* going to fall on your head), so you can go and make yourself another cup of tea and definitely have another biscuit.

## What's different about university exams?

Ultimately, you are not novices to exams, having probably done A levels or equivalent. But the one thing that is quite different about university is that it's somewhat less about memorising material and more about practicing *applying* that material. Obviously you cannot predict exactly from what angle the exam will ask you to tackle a question - trying to learn a response to every possible nuanced aspect of a topic is an endless and probably quite frustrating task. Instead, it's about having explored a variety of ways of exploring a topic with the material that you do have; this will help you identify gaps in your notes as well as



familiarity with actually deploying the material in a different order to the sequence of your notes!

One really good way of helping with all this is to try answering practice questions based on supervision titles or past papers. Don't worry if, at first, the thought of writing against the clock terrifies you. Try just writing a handwritten essay which contains about as much content as you think you could include in an hour, but without actually placing yourself under any time-pressure. A next level up is giving yourself unlimited time to plan and even write an introduction paragraph, before then giving yourself, say, 45 minutes to write the rest of the essay (many find they need five to ten minutes to plan an essay in an exam, so it's good to account for that in your practice). Don't be disheartened if your first few attempts make you want to rip up the pages, angsty-novelist style. It *will* get easier.

Someone once told me a metaphor which I think works pretty well for exams: that it's all about making sure everything is 'half baked'. That is, it's not about having your perfect answer ready and memorised - this is likely to mean you walk into the exam and force your perfect model answer to fit any question that comes up, and this is unlikely to work. But nor is it about simply walking in with your memorised notes and no idea of how you would apply the material to a question. Rather, it's about having a rough idea of how you approach the topic - your general point of view, common arguments and trajectories etc - while keeping it sufficiently flexible and open that you can apply it in new ways should that be required by the exam questions. It sounds like a big ask, but once you get into the swing of it, you'll surprise yourself, I promise. You'll also be very surprised at what you manage to do when you're actually sitting there, writing against the clock - everyone has moments where they write stuff they could never have planned in advance.

A few other things are different from A levels. For example you will be expected to cite people's names - and usually the date of the relevant publication that you are citing - when you reference ideas or arguments. Direct quotations are not usually necessary for sociology exams unless you are writing an essay specifically on one text or the works of one writer/thinker, in which case it's good to have some up your sleeve to demonstrate you have actually read the text(s)... But when writing an essay on an issue, such as the role of the media in elections, or globalisation and the environment, you will be citing multiple writers and you can paraphrase their points and arguments rather than directly quoting.

## Staying healthy in body and mind

One commonly cited danger of exam term is slipping into the habit of constantly comparing yourself to others. People deal with the pressures of exams differently. Some people find it calms them down to tell others precisely how many hours and minutes they have spent that day in the library. You can find yourself sitting there, furiously calculating your own day's work in response. This is not a healthy habit to get into. An 'hour's work' means so many different things: how much of that hour was spent 'briefly' browsing Facebook / worrying / staring out of the window / finding a book in the labyrinth of the University Library that is on the overspill shelf for the overspill shelf up six flights of stairs? The most important thing to remember is that other people's work habits often make you feel like you are not doing enough - and they are, in fact, almost certainly feeling the same way about *your* work habits.



The best thing to do is try to disengage from any process of comparison and find the path that works for you. Some people like getting up very early and find that their golden time is before lunch, others need their lie-in, and don't operate until after several cups of coffee and a leisurely breakfast. Some people love libraries, others coffee shops, or their own / friends' rooms. I have one friend who has a two hour 'slump' like a kind of siesta period straight after lunch every day, in which he feels he cannot do anything productive, and so indulges in his day's procrastination all in one go and keeps it nicely delineated,

knowing that this process makes him work better in the latter part of the afternoon. Some people like to ensure they never work after dinner and have their evenings off to see friends or have some personal headspace.

Most importantly, make sure you take time out to do things you enjoy that have no connection to exams whatsoever - whether that is colouring in (adult colouring books now being a legitimate pastime!), watching TV, reading novels, or chilling out with friends. Your friends and college community provide one of the most important sources of support during exams. Make time for each other; you can never be the best friend ever during exams - because it is a very personal and time-consuming period - so don't place too much pressure on yourself, but being there for the people that matter to you is rewarding, and they will almost certainly do the same for you. Don't be afraid to ask for help from those around you, to admit that it's all got too much, and to allow yourself to throw the towel in now and then and go to the pub / get an ice cream.

Alongside friends, sleep and exercise are crucial ingredients to health during exam term. Remember to ensure you have a regular and consistent sleeping pattern; research on insomnia suggests one of the most important things is a consistent bedtime routine. Don't work too late if it means you can't sleep, take time to 'switch off' by reading easy novels, or listening to audiobooks or music. Sleep is hugely important for mental and physical health, and also for cognitive capacity and memory formation. Trying to consistently get at least eight hours sleep will make a big difference to both your motivation and wellbeing.

When you have exams you might feel there is simply no time in the day for sport or exercise - or it might feel like the last thing you feel like doing! Team sports are less prominent in exam term, but many do continue, and many college level championships have their final matches of the year in the run up to exams; playing sport with others is a great motivation for getting you away from your desk. Alternatively, if you're not a team-sport person, and the thought of jogging makes you very unhappy, then even a brisk walk once a day will get your heart rate up and have a significant impact on your productivity, concentration and mental wellbeing.

## Support

Exams are stressful, and even if you do all the right things, sometimes things can get really tough. A lot of Cambridge students are perfectionists, and used to high levels of success academically. Putting lots of these perfectionists in one place makes for some awesome 2am conversations, but it can also exacerbate feelings of inadequacy or pressure.

If you find exam term has got on top of you, you are not alone. Too many people suffer in isolation, assuming no one can help or understand, or that it's a sign of weakness or somehow 'dramatic' to ask for help. None of these things are true. Lots of students need and seek extra support and input during exam term - or at other points during the year - and there are a whole host of options for you to consider. In the next section I outline the networks of support available, at college and university level, and beyond.

The most important thing with mental health is to recognise there is a problem, and to act as early as possible. Even if you don't think it's worth talking to anyone, and/or even if you feel things are 'not that bad' - it is almost always worth talking to someone anyway. Just the act of sharing how you're feeling can be an enormous weight off your shoulders, and people are often more able to provide help and support than we give them credit for. Moreover, talking to someone early on gets the coping mechanisms and supportive individuals in place for when things *do* get overwhelming.

## Section 7: dealing with difficulties, networks of support

Every student has moments where things get tough. This isn't to scare you, it's just to say: it's okay to feel that way, and normal and healthy to seek help. There is a whole network of options at Cambridge, designed to offer different types of welfare support to students.

### In-college support

Tutors are assigned to you in your first week by your college. You will probably have met them at least once by now; they are your pastoral point of contact within college, and a good place to start if you have concerns. It's a slight lucky dip with tutors as to whether



yours is someone you feel comfortable talking to and trust. Remember that if you don't feel comfortable talking to your tutor you can approach any other tutor in college. So if you don't want to talk to your own tutor, it's worth asking around your friends to see what their tutors are like, and whether any of them can recommend chatting to theirs. Alternatively, if you have a good relationship with your DoS, you can talk to them; though they are primarily a source of academic rather than pastoral support, your DoS is still a figure of support, and if you have a good relationship with them, and would prefer to speak to them than your tutor, you should definitely share how you feel.

Other sources of in-college support are the college nurse, college families, and the welfare team. You should be able to make an appointment to speak to your college nurse much like you would your GP, and they can point you in the direction of mental health support. Most colleges put together 'families' for freshers, made up of 2nd and/or 3rd year students at your college, who can offer guidance and help on life at Cambridge. If there is an older student - whether or not in your 'family' - that you feel comfortable talking to, they are also a good place to start with seeking help. It's likely they have faced troubles of their own over the course of their time at Cambridge and will be well able to sympathise and offer advice for the next steps.

The welfare team is led by your college JCR Welfare Officer. This person has usually received formal training in counselling and support, and their job is to provide support to students, so don't shy away from asking them for help; they can only help you if they know what's going on for you. They will also be aware of the various sources of support and help in and out of the university. We have listed some of these sources in the section below, but the list is not comprehensive, so do speak with your college nurse, Welfare Officer, or tutor at college if you would like to access further resources or support.

## University support

### Linkline

*'Linkline is the night-time listening support and information service for Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin Universities, run by students for students. You can call us to talk about anything. We are anonymous and confidential, everything you say is between you and Linkline. We don't judge, we don't tell you what to do or give you any advice, we'll just provide you with the space and the time to go through whatever's on your mind so you can work out what the right thing is for you.'*

Telephone: (open from 7pm-7am everyday) 01223 744 444 or 01223 367 575

Email: [email@linkline.org.uk](mailto:email@linkline.org.uk)

Skype: (open from 7pm-7am everyday) linkline.cambridge

Website: <http://cambridge.nightline.ac.uk/>

### CUSU (Cambridge University Student Union)

*'The Student Advice Service offers free, confidential and independent support to all Cambridge University students. If you feel you have been discriminated against, treated unfairly or would like to discuss something that is bothering you, contact us, whether it's the first time you have a question or as a last resort.'*

Website: <https://www.cusu.cam.ac.uk/advice/>

#### **CUSU International**

Website: <http://www.international.cusu.cam.ac.uk/welfare/>

#### **CUSU BME**

Website: <http://www.bme.cusu.cam.ac.uk/>

#### **CUSU Disabilities**

Website: <http://www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/exec/welfare/>

Email: [disabled-welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:disabled-welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk)

#### **CUSU Women's**

Website: <http://www.womens.cusu.cam.ac.uk/welfare/>

#### **CUSU LGBT+**

Website: <http://www.lgbt.cusu.cam.ac.uk/welfare/>

Email: [lgbt-welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk](mailto:lgbt-welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk)

### University of Cambridge Counselling Service

*'Many personal decisions are made and problems solved through discussions with friends or family, a College Tutor or Director of Studies, a Nurse, Chaplain, colleague, line manager or a GP. However, at times it is right to seek help away from one's familiar daily environment. The University Counselling Service exists to meet such a need. Seeking counselling is about making a positive choice to get help by talking confidentially with a professionally trained listener who has no other role in your life.'*

Website: <http://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp>

## **Student Advice Service**

*'We employ two full time, professional Student Advisors and three trained elected student advice officers also provide support and representation. We offer free, confidential and impartial support to all Cambridge University students. You can come to see us with any issues that you have - whether personal or academic.'*

Website: <http://www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/about/>

E-mail: [advice@studentadvice.cam.ac.uk](mailto:advice@studentadvice.cam.ac.uk)

Telephone: 01223 746999

Advice Drop-in Sessions: Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 12pm-2pm at the Graduate Union (17 Mill Lane)

## **Out of University support**

### **Samaritans**

*'If you're given the time and space to talk things through, you can find a way through your problems. Samaritans help you to explore your options so you can make decisions that are right for you. Talk to us any time you like, in your own way, and off the record - about whatever's getting to you.'*

Phone: 08457 90 90 90 (Day or night)

Address: 4 Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW

Website: <http://www.samaritans.org/>

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### **MIND**

*'We are a dynamic, county-wide charity that supports local people in their recovery from mental health issues, promotes wellbeing and campaigns against stigma and discrimination'*

Phone: 0845 766 0163

Website: <http://www.mindincambs.org.uk/>

Email: [enquiries@mindincambs.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@mindincambs.org.uk)

### **Student Minds**

*'We're a national student mental health charity working on a range of mental health difficulties and coordinating campaigns on campuses across the UK. We run student support groups so that students experiencing mental health difficulties have access to a supportive environment in which they can talk openly about life, university and mental health.'*

Website: <http://www.studentminds.org.uk/>

## **B-eat**

*'Beat is the UK's eating disorder charity. We provide information and support through Helplines which people can call, text or email; online support including information, message boards and online support groups, and Helpfinder, an online directory of support services'*

Website: <https://www.b-eat.co.uk/>

## **DHIVERSE**

*'DHIVERSE is the HIV & Sexual Health charity for Cambridgeshire. Our focus is to promote good sexual health and work to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections and HIV, we provide support for people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS, and we work to challenge the stigma and prejudice which can affect people living with HIV, and to challenge sexism, homophobia and transphobia.'*

Website: <http://www.dhiverse.org.uk/>

Phone: 01223 508805

Email: [info@dhiverse.org.uk](mailto:info@dhiverse.org.uk)

## **FRANK**

*'Friendly, confidential drugs advice'*

Phone: 0800 77 66 00

Website: <http://www.talktofrank.com/>

## **Open Out Cambridgeshire**

*'Open Out is a confidential third party reporting scheme that offers support, advice and information to victims and witnesses of Hate Crime.'*

Tel: 01223 823552

## **SexYOUality**

*'We work to support all young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans individuals through often difficult years. We offer a number of services to support and empower you to get everything you want out of life.'*

Website: <http://syacambs.org/>

## **Disability Rights UK**

*'Disability Rights UK is the leading charity of its kind in the UK. We are run by and for people with lived experience of disability or health conditions.'*

Website: <http://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/>

## **General academic queries or concerns**

There are other individuals within the academic community of Cambridge who can provide you with help and guidance relating to supervisions, workload, course content, and other academic issues. Alongside your DoS, supervisors, and older students at your college, there are also your lecturers, to whom you can direct concerns about course content that your supervisors are unable to help you with.

There are also two or three student representatives at the sociology department to whom you can direct questions or suggestions for change; they attend the departmental meetings twice a term and provide feedback to course organisers. Feedback about reading list content, lecture or supervision quality, workload has, in the past, made a big difference to the way papers are taught and structured, so your voice really does make a difference. Their email addresses and photos should be pinned up on noticeboards around the department building, and an email sent out early on in term explaining how to contact them.

There is also a Head of Undergraduates within sociology who is in charge of the overall undergraduate education experience, and to whom you can go directly with concerns or questions if you wish. Currently this is Dr. Ella McPherson, who can be contacted on [em310@cam.ac.uk](mailto:em310@cam.ac.uk)