



# Applying to Oxford and Cambridge

A guide for  
students from  
Solihull



# Introduction to our Guide

If you're thinking about applying to university, especially top universities like Oxford and Cambridge, or wondering about the process of applying or what uni will be like, this guide is full of useful information and tips and tricks to help you.

InsideUni is a student-driven website designed to distribute the first-hand advice we wish we'd had when we were applying. We want everybody, regardless of their background or access to personal networks, to have the information they need to make a successful university application. On our website, you can find information about every undergraduate course at Oxford and Cambridge, personal interview testimonies, and a student written blog about life at university.

This guide was written by current students at Oxford and Cambridge who come from the West Midlands and the InsideUni team. We've tailored it to address the main questions and concerns of students and teachers that we met during our in school focus groups in Solihull, so we hope that it answers your questions and allays your worries.

## What's in the guide?

This guide includes student-written advice about:

1. Applying to University - the logistics & things you need to consider
2. Finances, student loans, and bursaries
3. Overcoming and debunking myths and gossip about Oxbridge
4. Life at university & after university
5. Application resource recommendations

And finally, some advice, tips and pictures from current West Midlands students.

If you'd like to see more InsideUni content, then you can visit:

- Our website: [www.insideuni.org](http://www.insideuni.org)
- Our YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/c/InsideUni>

Follow us on social media by searching for *InsideUni* to keep up to date with new videos, guides, and bitesize tips and tricks:



# So how do I apply to uni?

Making a competitive application to university shouldn't be a mystery, so this section of the guide will run you through the different stages of applying to university. By the end of this section, you should be confident in how the process works, even for the most complex application processes!

## Step 1: Choosing the subject you want to study

Choosing what course or subject you'd like to study at university can be tricky, especially since there are lots of different courses to choose from!

**DID YOU KNOW THERE'S OVER 50,000 UNDERGRADUATE COURSES AVAILABLE TO CHOOSE FROM THE UK?**

Think about what you currently enjoy and what your aspirations are for the future. Some careers have vocational degrees attached to them, such as Dentistry, while others might be less clear: you don't have to have a law degree to be a lawyer. If you're not sure, think about subjects or topics that you enjoy or are really interested in.

You should check the entry requirements and course structure for all the subjects and courses you're interested in **as early as possible**, because:

- Certain courses have **subject requirements**: they might require you to, or recommend that you have studied certain subjects for A-level (e.g. Chemistry for Medicine (required), Maths for Biochemistry (recommended)).
- Each course has **grade requirements** which you must meet in order to enter the course.
- Other features of the course like having a **year abroad** or **year in industry** might affect which choices you make.

Some people go to university to study a subject they did an A-level in, such as Physics, or History. However, some courses don't require any subjects for you to go, and may be completely new to you, like Anthropology, Education, or Politics, or creative courses like Media/Film Studies. It's important to check out what the requirements are before you make any decisions!

You could make a shortlist of subjects and check out some websites which might help you find different course structures. We really recommend the [UCAS guide to choosing a course](#), and [UniRise's WTF Should I Study at Uni Guide](#).

## Step 2: Choosing the universities you'll apply to

Courses in the same/similar subjects will be different according to the university you apply to, so it's important to read the prospectuses of different universities and take a look at the course content.

For example, you might look at studying Economics at Cambridge, but in Oxford, the available degree is in Economics and Management. Similarly, there are separate science degrees available at Oxford (e.g. Chemistry, Biology) but at Cambridge, you would apply for a course called *Natural Sciences* instead and specialise after entering. Similarly, you might look at single and joint honours degrees (e.g. History vs History and Politics).

### So what should I consider when choosing a university?



### Worried about your accent or moving somewhere new?

For some people, it's not just about the logistics of attending university but a personal thing too. You might be wondering if you'll fit in at uni, especially if you have a distinct regional accent compared to some other people who might be going to university. Remember that there will be people there with other regional accents and that it makes you unique. It's a *good* thing to have one!

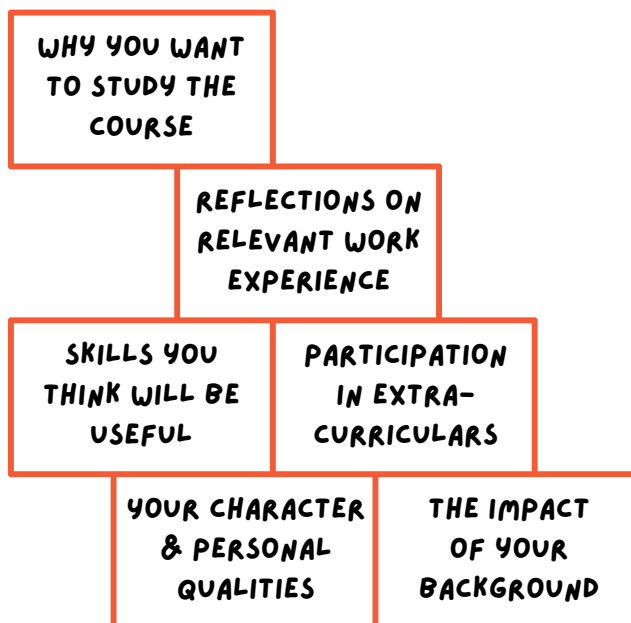
### Step 3: Acing the personal statement

The information you'll want to include in your personal statement will vary according to what you're applying for. Take it as an opportunity to tell the university why you are an excellent candidate for their course.

UCAS personal statements can be no longer than 4000 characters (including spaces!), so you need to be concise. You have to submit the same statement to each university you apply to, so don't mention any specific uni names in it either.

#### Building a personal statement

Figuring out what the building blocks of your personal statement might be can be tricky. To help you out, we've got some suggestions for you.



#### How do I use these building blocks?

It's important to explain *why* the things you've mentioned make you a good candidate. Hopefully, you'll want to learn more about them, so this is a good place to start in terms of thinking about how to explain your ambitions and goals.

If you've decided to apply to a top university like Oxford or Cambridge, your personal statement should be around 80-90% academic in focus. To achieve this, you can talk about "super-curricular" activities: things you've done outside the classroom to discover your subject. This could be through reading books you've picked up at the local library, listening to podcasts, watching TEDTalks, or completing online tasks.

## Step 4: UCAS Form & Added Extras

Once you have written your personal statement and you're happy with it, you can fill in your UCAS form and send it off. Then, your teacher/adviser will add some extra information such as references and verify what you've submitted before sending it off to the universities. Make sure that you complete your UCAS form in enough time for your teacher to submit it before the right deadline. If you need to check the deadline for your course then head to UCAS!

UCAS Deadline this year 🔍

If you apply to Cambridge, you'll also need to fill in "My Cambridge Application" (MCA) which gives Cambridge some more information about you which might not be in your UCAS form.

### Admissions tests

Some courses will require you to sit an admissions test to decide whether the university would like to offer you a place. You'll need to check these individual requirements, but it's likely you'll need to sit one if you apply to Oxford or Cambridge. To find information on where to sit your test and when, UCAS has a full webpage to explain this: <https://www.ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/admissions-tests>.

The InsideUni website has a student written guide to explain and support you through every admissions test currently being used at Oxford and Cambridge.

### Written work

For some courses at Oxford and Cambridge, the university may want you to send in some examples of your written work for the admissions tutors to assess. In this instance, you'll likely be contacted by the university to send this in. If you're called for interview, it's possible you'll be asked about the work you submitted, so remember to keep a copy of everything. You might want to take a look over the work again before your interview!

## Interviews

Interviews can often be the most daunting and most mysterious aspect of an application process. But remember that it's just one stage of the process, and to take it in your stride.

At Oxford and Cambridge, interviews are like a short tutorial - or teaching session - with a tutor who is an expert in the subject(s) you want to study. In the interview, showing enthusiasm for your subject and the ability to take on new information and build an argument in response to a question is very important.

In 2022, interviews will take place online (except for Trinity College, Cambridge). This might change in the future, but you'll be informed in good time of whether it will be online or in person. The good thing about online interviews is that you won't have to worry about travelling from home to complete them.

At other universities, interviews might take a different form - they might be competency-based and ask you questions about your skills like time management, for example. If you're unsure about what your interview might entail, you should contact the admissions support team at the university in question, and hopefully they'll point you in the right direction. You can normally find these contact details on the university website's admissions pages.



"I realised through the platform that interviews were a lot more conceptual, personal and even relaxing than my teachers at my school prepared me for. Access to specific information from students was reassuring and my real interview felt familiar and more accessible."

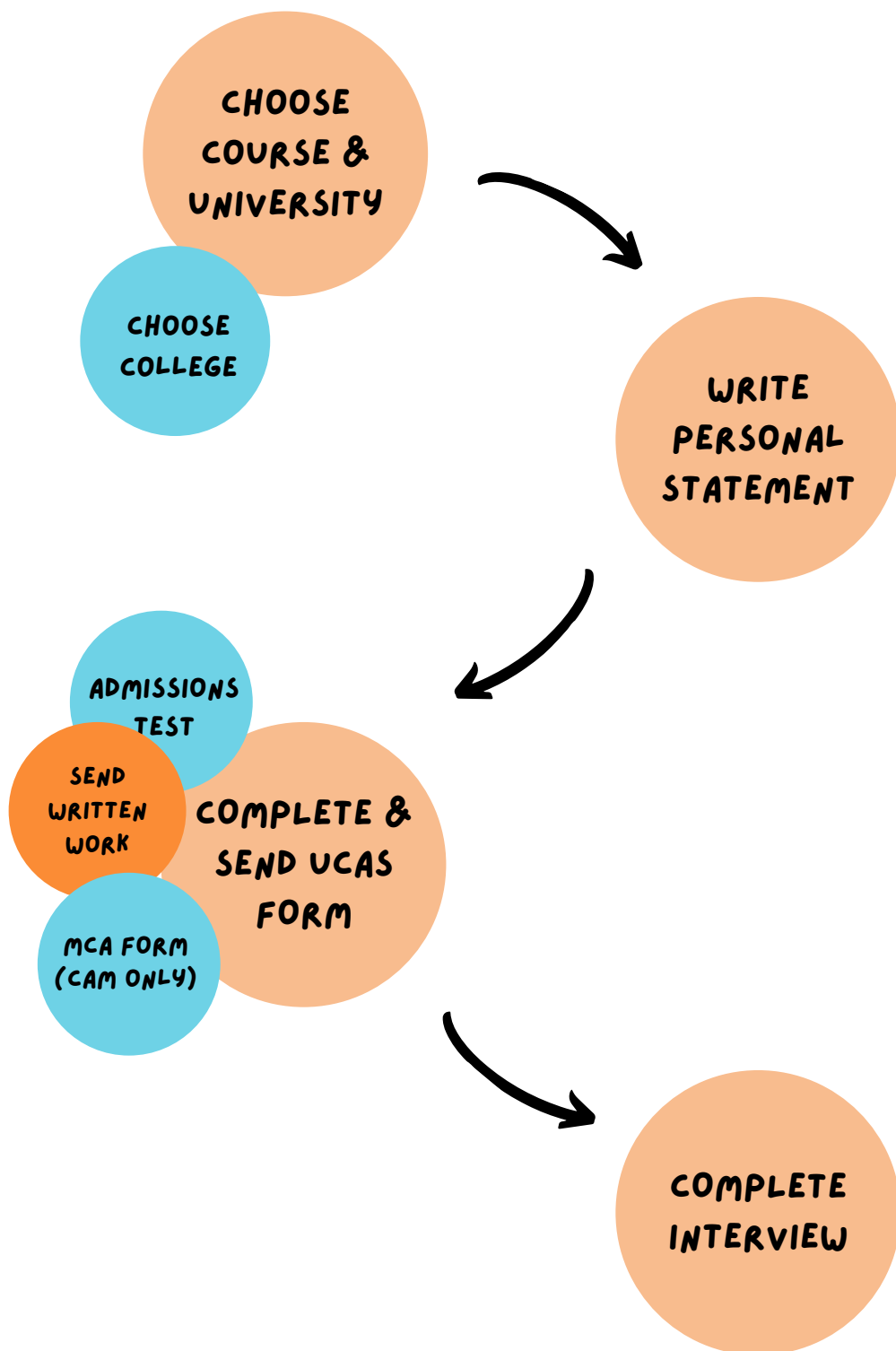
*Harman, Second Year History Student, University of Cambridge*



**INSIDEUNI HAS OVER 2,000 STUDENT-WRITTEN INTERVIEW TESTIMONIES FROM OXFORD AND CAMBRIDGE TO SHARE WITH YOU ON OUR WEBSITE!**

# Journey Tracker

This is an easy journey tracker to help you through the application process. In the small bubbles you'll find the extra things you might need to do to make the application to Oxford or Cambridge.





# Finances, Student Loans, and Bursaries

Working out how to ensure you'll have enough money while at university can be really daunting. From student loans to paying rent and getting in the weekly shop, there is a fair bit to think about when it comes to money. We hope that this section of the guide will make it clearer for you.

## What's a student loan and how does it work?

Student loans are repayable loans from the government which enable you to pay your tuition fees and cover your living costs while at university. For undergraduates, there are 2 loans available:

1. **Tuition fee loan:** paid directly to the university, covers the cost of attending (normally £9250).
2. **Maintenance loan:** is paid to you to help you cover your living costs. Everybody gets a different amount, which depends on your individual household circumstances.

You then pay back these loans after you graduate and once you're earning a certain amount of money.

## How much maintenance loan can I get from Student Finance?

Everybody who applies for a maintenance loan can receive a base amount, but if you choose to apply for more than this, the amount you get will be means-tested. This means the amount of money that you receive above the baseline will depend on your personal household circumstances. You'll need to ask whoever you live with at home to send Student Finance some documents to help with this.

If you're a care leaver, then you can apply as an independent student, which means you won't need to send this information in. Find more information about applying as a care leaver from England here: <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/exchange-blog/2019/july/help-support-students-whove-been-in-care/>.

## Finding other sources of income

Sometimes, the maintenance loan alone might not be enough to cover all of your living expenses while at university. Don't be worried, though, as there's plenty of ways to find sources of other income.

### Bursaries for West Midlands students at Oxford and Cambridge:



**OCR Bursary** of £3,000 in your first year for students attending Cambridge



**Oriel College Oxford** offers discretionary bursaries to their students based on need, and especially to students from the West Midlands

**University scholarships and bursaries.** Lots of universities provide scholarships and bursaries (that you don't have to pay back) depending on your circumstances.



**Cambridge bursary scheme:** up to £3,500 a year according to household income



**Oxford Crankstart scholarships and Oxford bursaries:** up to £5,000 support according to household income



**Cambridge Sheikh Family Bursaries:** available to all Muslim Cambridge students who are in hardship



**College grants and funds.** It's possible that your college might offer more grants and funding to help you cover costs.

**Paid work.** Lots of students take up part-time paid work while at university, normally in a retail or hospitality job. However at Oxford and Cambridge, this isn't permitted during term time due to the high workload, but the universities allow you to work during the holidays and usually offer opportunities to do paid work such as at open days.

# Debunking Myths

You might think that university will be full of people who you can't relate to - maybe they'll be too rich, have a posh accent, or just not know where you're from. You might also think that universities are looking for child prodigies or geniuses! However, we don't want you to think this way, so below we've debunked some myths about university life.

**"Everyone at university will be rich or posh, so I won't fit in."**

University is a great place because you meet people from all walks of life there. There will definitely be people at university (even if you never meet them!) who are very wealthy but the majority of people are not like this. Rest assured that you'll not be in the minority if you come from a working class or low income background.

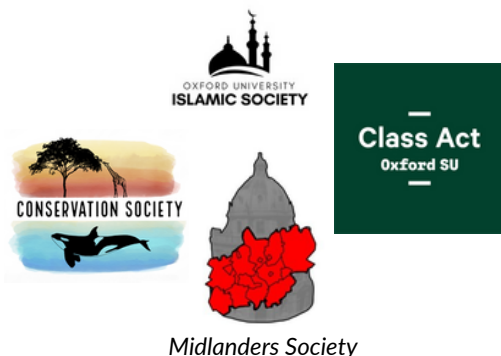
There are even Student Union campaigns and representatives such as Class Act at Oxford and Cambridge which support and represent working class students. At Oxford, there is a **Midlanders Society** where students from the Midlands all meet up and socialise through events, alongside societies such as African-Caribbean Society, or Islamic Society. During Freshers' Week and throughout your degree you'll be able to sign up to participate in lots of different societies, clubs and sports teams.

**Remember that impostor syndrome is completely normal, but you will have earned your place there like everyone else. You aren't there to fill a quota, and you are intelligent, so go in with that level of confidence, even if you don't feel it inside.**



**Jeevika**  
**Law, Oxford**  
**from Wolverhampton**

*These are just a few examples of the types of societies you can join if you go to Oxford or Cambridge which might help to represent you and help you make friends...*



**“It’s not worth it to go to Oxbridge if you get the same degree from a different university.”**

The extent to which going to Oxford or Cambridge Uni is worth it entirely depends on what you’re looking for out of your degree and university experience. Oxford and Cambridge offer the tutorial system of teaching, where once or twice a week you'll have a small discussion-based class with a few other students and an academic such as a professor or PhD student who is an expert in that topic. For some people, this style of learning might not work - it doesn't suit everybody - so don't feel pressured to apply for Oxbridge! What matters is that you enjoy and get what you want out of your university experience.

At Oxford and Cambridge, there are some unique traditions which you can get involved with, such as wearing 'academic dress' like gowns, going punting, getting "trashed" to celebrate the end of exams, or attending formal dinners. Formals are great, because you get restaurant-quality three course meals for a very good price. Your experience at every university will be unique, but some people might be interested especially in Oxford and Cambridge because of these more niche traditions and activities which happen during term time.



*Can't forget the classic trip out to the kebab van after a night of partying or a formal, too.*

*Here's one of our ambassadors Jeevika and her friends being trashed after finishing their final exams...*



*And all dressed up for a formal dinner in college! At formals, students normally wear formal outfits, and their gown.*

### **“Everyone at Oxford and Cambridge is really clever compared to me!”**

One of the main reasons that people apply to Oxbridge is because they are really passionate about their chosen subject. It doesn't necessarily mean they're good at everything! While Oxford and Cambridge have high entry requirements, lots of people are completely new to their degree subject. If you meet the entry requirements and the tutors liked you at interview, it's likely you'll fit right in.

Sometimes people think that everybody who goes to Oxford or Cambridge must have their Grade 8 in Piano, have done lots of expensive extracurricular activities, have read every book on the planet and know how to speak Latin. This isn't true. Oxford and Cambridge are looking for passionate and well-rounded students - it doesn't matter how much you know or how well you play an instrument or sport.

### **“University is too expensive for me to go to.”**

It's true that university can wrack up some costs, but this shouldn't deter you from applying or studying for the course that you really want to study. As we've explored in the Finance section, there are many different systems to help you support you financially at university.

There is lots of university funding (such as the Oxford and Cambridge bursary schemes) which you'll automatically receive if you're eligible. The college system at Oxford and Cambridge means that payment for meals and rent will differ, but it also means that some colleges will be able to offer you academic funds to cover the costs of books or things you need for your degree, or reduced rent if you are an independent student or care-leaver, so it's worth looking into this too!

***In terms of saving money I recommend batch cooking your meals. It's completely possible to eat healthy and get the right nutritious content. For buying clothes I hugely recommend charity shops or kilo sales - there's plenty of bargains to be found and there's so much funky clothes out there. Plus it's better for the environment to buy second hand clothes! Also, a weekly budget is a great idea to help save and keep track of money.***

**Masum  
Chemistry, Oxford  
from Birmingham**



# Life at University

## What's a day in the life like at university?

It's important to remember that university is much more flexible than school. You might finish later in the afternoon than you're used to at school, or have an entire day without classes. You can choose what lectures to attend, how much time to spend working compared to other things, and where to work too. You'll be able to figure out what routine works for you, how you work best, and how to balance a social life with university, which is academically tough.

Remember to check out our YouTube channel and TikTok to see what a day in the life might look like at Oxford and Cambridge.

## Okay, but what kind of classes will I be going to?

The most common type of class you will have heard of is a **LECTURE**. Lectures are held in big groups: often, over 200 students will be there. During a lecture, an academic such as a professor will deliver a presentation with all the information you need to know. There's generally limited interaction with the teacher, although some lecturers will encourage more back-and-forth with their students than others.

Next, you'll probably go to **SEMINARS**. Seminars are held in smaller groups of students - maybe 20 at a time - and you'll discuss the reading and work you've been set beforehand together. Seminars are an opportunity to ask questions, debate with other students - to challenge, and be challenged.

Some students get to go to **LABS OR PRACTICALS**. You'll spend time in the laboratory or doing practical activities, maybe in a group or individually, and these are usually for science degrees. They're a great opportunity to get stuck in.

Finally, you might come across **TUTORIALS OR SUPERVISIONS**. These are the main teaching method at Oxford and Cambridge. In a tutorial/supervision, you'll be in a very small class - perhaps 2 or 3 students and 1 teacher - and you'll discuss work you've done beforehand such as an essay, ask questions, and get to learn from someone who probably knows a lot about what you've just been studying!



## **Where will I live?**

Most students live in "halls" or university accommodation in their first year, especially if they move away from home. Halls are normally shared flats with other students - you'll have your own room (and maybe an en-suite bathroom) and then shared spaces like kitchens and living rooms. Some Halls are catered, meaning you can pay a little more every week to be served hot meals without having to cook. For the rest of their time at university, most students move into privately rented accommodation.

At Oxford and Cambridge, lots of colleges offer accommodation in halls for all three or four years of your course. Some however do require you to find private accommodation for 1 or more years of your degree. It's important to have a look at the different accommodation types and facilities between colleges when you're making your mind up as to where to apply to.


## **Making new friends & having a work life balance**

It's important to many people at uni that they have a good work life balance, and make new friends. There's plenty of ways to do this at university, whether it's making friends with people who live in your accommodation, or joining a new society or club. There really is a society for everybody - whether you like music, sport, debating, or want to get to know other people who speak the same language as you or share your ethnicity!

At Oxbridge, there are plenty of clubs and societies at college level. Each college normally has "Social Reps" who organise fun social events such as themed parties, fun dinners, sporting events with refreshments, or even talent shows.

## **What about life after university?**

There's lots of options to choose from in terms of what you do after university. Some people go to uni knowing exactly what they'd like to do afterwards and some people aren't as sure. There will be lots of opportunities to get to grips with and understand different careers and job sectors through Careers Fairs and internship or work experience opportunities, and some people choose to continue with more study through postgraduate courses like a Master's, or even a PhD.



## Application Resources: Our Recommendations



Both Oxford and Cambridge have designated **link colleges** which can support students from certain areas of the country with their applications. **Girton College, Cambridge** and **Keble College, Oxford** are the designated link colleges for Solihull, and also participate in wider West Midlands support schemes.



To find out if there are any opportunities such as open days, study days or possibilities to meet representatives in-school, you can visit their outreach pages by clicking their names above, or popping them in your search engine.

Looking for a current student to mentor you through the process? **Zero Gravity** offers free long-term mentoring by current students. They will support you through the university application process, including helping you with your personal statement and with interview preparation.



**Advancing Access** is an amazing online resource **for teachers!** Advancing Access offers free training and support for teachers and advisers who are supporting young people during their university applications. This includes webinars, in-school support, and they also have partnerships with 24 Russell Group Universities.



## Advice & Tips from our West Midlands Ambassadors



Even if you don't think you have the slightest chance, apply. The worst that will happen is that you don't get in, and the experience of the application process itself is a great learning experience.

**Jeevika**  
Law  
from *Wolverhampton*



**Charlotte**  
History  
from *Wolverhampton*

Be you...you deserve to be at Oxbridge as much as anyone else! Embrace your regional identity.



Impostor syndrome is only natural for people like us, but assimilating into the Oxbridge culture, whether that's the weird traditions, societies, or socials, will help put you at ease!



**Masum**  
Chemistry  
from *Birmingham*