Hi there!

My name’s Isaac and I’m a third year English student at Downing. First off many congratulations on making your offer, studying at Cambridge is a little hard to describe but I will do my absolute best to pre-empt any questions which might be sitting in your mind.

Firstly, do not be afraid, most people here are pretty normal, I think sometimes people expect the Cambridge environment to be quite archaic and continually full of high-level intellectual conversations, all the way from your supervisions to the conversations in your kitchen. Quite frankly when you finish up on a day of work, the last thing most people want to do is sit around and launch into a hugely philosophical discussion – I suppose those conversations do happen occasionally, but being at Cambridge is just as much about managing your down time as it is about managing your work. For example, if you’ve seen it before you get here, do not stress about the massive recommended reading list, compiled by the faculty, it is purely optional – no one in their right mind expects you to read all those books. If your Director of Studies sends you a shorter much more condensed reading list (I imagine they will be in touch at some point after you make your offer), have a crack at that list instead, it will be a lot more useful for next term, but don’t worry if you can’t make your whole way through it. The work schedule can feel quite intense at times and most people feel a little overwhelmed at first, but one of the really nice things about English is the flexible nature of the course.

The basic structure of the course revolves around the ‘Cambridge week’ which for some completely inexplicable reason runs from Thursday to Thursday (as opposed to Monday to Monday). Each week you will have at least one supervision – these are generally hour-long discussion-based meetings, run by an academic who specialises in the paper you are studying, and are done in small groups which helps to keep the discussion focussed as well as interesting! In the supervision you’ll usually discuss the topics raised in an essay which you will have written over the previous week. You’ll have eight supervisions on your paper for that term, one for each week of term, and correspondently will probably write between 6 and 8 essays during the term. The average length of a weekly essay is 2,000 words and will have been set by your supervisor after the previous supervision. When I first got to Cambridge, my initial reaction to the prospect of a 2,000 word essay every week was to panic… Don’t, it really isn’t as much as it sounds. As I said earlier the great thing about English is its flexibility, that supervision, and the essay, are your main pieces of work for the week. You’ll surprise yourself with how quickly you relax into the process of reading for, writing and editing an essay over the process of the week. The most important thing to remember is that these essays are supposed to be part of the teaching, so they’re a bit more like a set of experiments in research and essay style rather than highly-polished final products. If you work yourself into the ground trying to produce absolutely glowing pieces of work every single week, you’re probably going to find yourself exhausted and frustrated pretty quickly.

That one hour supervision is probably one of your few consistently scheduled pieces of contact time each week – which is a blessing, because it means you can choose when and where you work. However it does also mean that you need to think about your own schedule, unlike many courses you don’t really have much of a guiding structure or timetable, so it’s up to you to try and find a work process which suits you. This will probably take a few weeks, or even a term or so, but eventually you’ll realise that you there is a consistent rhythm which suits you. Of course researching and writing an essay each week doesn’t happen by itself and sometimes you might find yourself working through an all-nighter for a deadline, which is okay just try not to turn it into a regular habit! Just remember that at the end of the day, you can always ask for an extension on an essay if you really don’t think you can get it done by a deadline. A supervisor would much rather you produced a
slightly later piece of work which you are fairly happy with, rather than a completely last minute hatchet job. Don’t stress about a ‘doom-laden deadline’, most people here have asked for an essay extension at least once during their studies!

The two other main components of your course in Part 1, will be going to lectures, and supervisions on Practical Criticism. Practical Criticism is a sort of critical discipline developed in Cambridge, which you will also have a supervision on each week. Depending on the week you may be set small bits of reading or little, timed practice essays to write each week – I won’t go into it much now, but you’ll soon be pretty familiar with it. Aside from sporadic classes or seminars which your Director of Studies might organise with you, the final thing to think about will be lectures. You will probably feel like you need to attend each and every one of the lectures on your paper in first term, the best advice I can give is to see a host of them initially, and then just go to the ones which interest you/teach you something. You’re wasting your time if you force yourself to go to a lecture which you’re having trouble staying awake in, unlike most subjects English lectures are avowedly optional, so just pick the ones which you think will be useful for you.

I think the only thing left to say is, don’t make work your life! There are so many fantastic things to do outside of your studies: rowing, theatre, student journalism, whatever, anything you can think of which you want to do, there’s probably a society for it. So many of the societies in Cambridge offer amazing experiences outside of your degree, and if anything they can help you enjoy your degree more by giving you recourse to something else as well, and offering a different side to your life at Cambridge.

Hope this letter has been useful and reassuring, and looking forward to meeting you in October! Feel free to email me if you have any questions ij238@cam.ac.uk

Isaac