

Interview questions for discussion: Humanities

IMPORTANT: This random selection of sample questions available on the internet is intended to help you practise thinking through some interesting problems aloud. It is *extremely* unlikely that you will be asked any of them in your interview.

Some of these questions will seem daunting or irrelevant – don't worry! Remember that:

- An interview is a conversation, not an interrogation, so questions will arise in a natural way, and interviewers will prompt you, question your views and ask linked questions.
- *Your* interview questions will usually be based on subjects you studied at A-level, your personal statement, or your written work. If not, they will be intended to be unfamiliar to all candidates, to see how you think about a new problem.
- It is impossible to *predict* what you will be asked and it is a waste of your time to try to do this, but you can *practise*: talk about your subject and your interests; discuss, defend, debate and adapt your opinions; try to think about questions like these which relate to your own interests and how you might approach them.

Example Question with possible discussion points:

“Why do you think an English student might be interested in the fact that Coronation Street has been running for 50 years?”

- Application of literary analysis to other media
- Storytelling techniques
- Serialisation
- Collaborative writing
- How do writers (like Dickens) move from being perceived as ‘popular’ to ‘canonical’?
- What defines ‘literature’?

General Questions:

“Talk me through the last three years of your education, the choices you have made, and the factors that have led you to decide that you want to study this subject.”

“What do you like about the Cambridge course?”

“Tell me about the last book that you read.”

“In your personal statement, you mention reading/listening to/watching X. Can you summarise, in three sentences or fewer, the key arguments of X?”

Example Questions by subject:

History/Archaeology/Politics:

“Imagine we had no records about the past at all, except everything to do with sport – how much of the past could we find out about?”

“Which person (or sort of person) in the past would you most like to interview, and why?”

“Is violence always political? Does 'political' mean something different in different contexts?”

“What makes civil wars so different from other wars?”

“What are the links between History and Archaeology?”

“What are the origins of your first name? What is the significance of given names? How about place names?”

“Tell me about your favourite museum. What’s the role of a museum?”

“Do you think modern history is more relevant than ancient and medieval history?”

“Are modern historians more nihilistic about religion?”

“Does History repeat itself? Would it be worth studying if it didn’t?”

“What place that you have been to recently interested you the most historically?”

“What can we conclude from reading an ancient or medieval historian’s work, apart from the facts?”

History of Art:

“Discuss restoration and conservation. Are they good or bad?”

“What is your opinion on the Turner Prize and Brit Art?”

“How does art reflect its society?”

“What work of art would you most like to own?”

“How can art be musical?”

Law:

“What does it mean for someone to ‘take’ another's car?”

“If the punishment for parking on double yellow lines were death, and therefore nobody did it, would that be a just and effective law?”

“Should it be illegal to run a red light in the middle of the night on an empty road?”

“Should the use of mobile phones be banned on public transport?”

“Can you imagine a world without laws?”

“Does a girl scout have a political agenda?”

“Tell me about a case that you find particularly interesting.”

“What is best: a written or non-written constitution?”

“Why should justice not be retributive?”

“Do you enter a contract when you get on a bus?”

“A man stabbed another man in his sleep, not realising that his victim had already died in his sleep from a heart attack. Should the stabber be convicted of murder?”

“What is 'necessity'? Are there any times when a defence of necessity would not be appropriate?”

Philosophy/Theology:

“Is someone who risks their own life (and those of others) in extreme sports or endurance activities a hero or a fool?”

“If I deconstruct someone, record their structure, and send that information elsewhere to reconstruct them, is it the same person?”

“I agree that air transport contributes to harmful climate change. But whether or not I make a given plane journey, the plane will fly anyway. So there is no moral reason for me not to travel by plane.' Is this a convincing argument?”

“Suppose that you could plug yourself into a machine for the rest of your life, which would give you all the experiences you find enjoyable and valuable. Once in the machine, you would not know that you are plugged in, and that these experiences are not real. Would you go into the machine? If so, why? If not, why not?”

“Is it a matter of fact or knowledge that time travels in only one direction?”

“What’s the importance of literacy in the development of religions? Can you give some examples?”

“Differentiate between power and authority.”

“Is emotion an important part of religion?”

“If you wanted to form a government of Philosophers, what selection criteria would you use?”

English:

“Why might it be useful for an English student to read the Twilight series?”

“What is the purpose of comedy?”

“What is the effect of a story within a story?”

“Was Romeo impulsive?”

“Tell me about your favourite poem.”

“JK Rowling has just published a book for adults after the hugely successful Harry Potter series. In what ways do you think that writing for children is different to writing for adults?”

“Is there a difference between innocence and naivety?”

“Is the stage a platform for opinions or just entertainment?”

“Tell me about the last book you read.”

“What are the advantages and disadvantages of ignoring context when dealing with works of literature?”

“What are the positives and negatives of adapting books to films? Is it a positive thing to bring literature to a wider audience?”

“Can books be bad for you?”

“What makes a short story different from a novel?”

“Should poetry be difficult to understand?”

Languages:

“In a world where English is a global language, why learn French/German/Spanish?”

“Why do you want to study a very literature-based degree?”

“What do you think Voltaire meant by 'Il faut cultiver notre jardin'?”

“What are the differences between Spain and Latin America?”

“Franz Kafka said that literature is the axe for the frozen sea inside us. Do you agree?”

“How does Le Monde differ from English broadsheets?”

“Tell me about a text you’ve read recently in French/German/Spanish.”

“What do we lose if we only read a foreign work of literature in translation?”

“If you had to send 3 things in a package to a group of isolated tribes people that would immediately let them know what it means to be 'French/German/Spanish', what would you choose?”

“What is language?”

Classics:

“Relate Classics to a modern piece of Literature.”

“Tell me about chronology in the Odyssey.”

“Was Ovid trying to moralise or entertain?”

“Is the Aeneid just political propaganda supporting Augustus?”

“How many Latin cases are there excluding the vocative? How many do you think might have been in Proto Indo-European?”

“Give a few meanings of the word 'Quibus'. What peculiarity does this word have in relation to a certain preposition? Which personal pronouns share this property? On the subject of personal pronouns, can you name two intensifying enclitics affixed to it? Why shouldn't we stack enclitics?”

“Latin is far from the pristine, perfect, sanctified tongue it is portrayed to be’ – what do you think of this statement? (You might want to think about defective verbs, obsolete particles and the lack of the perfect active participle).”

“What is the difference in Herodotus' and Tacitus' histories? Which one do we find closest to what a History means today? What else can we conclude from reading an ancient historian’s work, apart from the facts?”

Land Economy:

“What do you think about those who regard global warming as nonsense?”

“Why is traffic so bad in cities and what would you do about it?”

“Is it more important to focus on poverty at home or abroad?”

“How can urban planners increase happiness in local communities without increasing spending?”

“You’ve just been appointed Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. What is your first Act in office?”

Architecture:

“How would you reduce crime through architecture?”

“Tell me about one of your favourite portfolio pieces. What are its strengths and weaknesses? How might you develop it?”

“What’s the importance of light in architecture? ...Can you give me some examples?”

“Tell me about your favourite building...what are its strengths? What’s your least favourite, and why is it so unsuccessful?”

Geography:

“If I visited your local area, what would I be interested in?”

“Suggest a list of conditions necessary to sustain life on Earth.”

“Is globalisation a good thing?”

“What do you think would be the major differences on Earth if,

- a) no atmosphere had ever formed?
- b) there was no water?
- c) plate tectonics did not exist?”

“What is the relevance of physical geography to human geography?”

“Can you tell me about a recent news story related to Geography, which you found interesting?”

“Are fair-trade bananas really fair?”

“How do mountains originate? How can computers help geographers find out more about this question?”

Economics:

“Why are rich countries rich and poor countries poor?”

“What would you say if Theresa May were to take a report which shows that people who go to university earn more than those who do not, and then proclaim that going to university causes you to earn more?”

“What is the difference between buying and selling of slaves and the buying and selling of football players?”

“Differentiate x^2/z^2+h^2 ”

“Would it be feasible to have an economy entirely based on the service sector?”

“Should governments subsidise agriculture?”

“Sketch the graph of $\sin^2x+2=y$ ”

“What role should the state play in the economy?”

“What is the point of privatisation?”

“What are the arguments for and against the Minimum wage?”

“Why is bankruptcy law necessary? Do you think it is a good way of encouraging entrepreneurship? How else might entrepreneurship be encouraged?”

“Do bankers deserve the pay they receive? And should government do something to limit how much they get?”

Music:

“If you could invent a new musical instrument, what kind of sound would it make?”

“Do you feel that music is an art incomparable to history in that history cannot be performed?”

“Why do black men say that white men can't rap?”

“How did Wagner's operas influence the history of Western music?”

“Consider Girls Aloud and football anthems with reference to functionality of music.”

“How had the piano developed by the time of Beethoven?”

HSPS:

“Is American politics democratic?”

“Should women have their own representatives?”

“Are there conditions under which the outcomes of democratic elections should be ignored?”

“If you could interview a relative who had lived through World War II, what would you expect to learn about the main ways society has changed since the war, and what might make their perspective distinctive?”

“Does the recent migration crisis in Europe challenge or reinforce racism?”

“Must all revolutions necessarily fail?”

“What are the major causes and consequences of global inequality?”