How to prepare for the Modern and Medieval Languages Written Assessment

What is the test? You can expect to take the one hour written assessment for MML at the College where you will be interviewed. Remember that it is only one part of our assessment of you as a candidate, alongside the interviews, schoolwork (if your College has requested it) and everything else we get to know about you from your application form.

Take a look at the sample tests on the MML website. You’ll see that answers involve writing in both an MML language that you want to study here (Section A), as well as in English (Section B).

Why write in the foreign language? In Section A of the test you are asked to respond in a language you wish to study here at Cambridge. If you are applying to study two languages in which you are studying for A-levels or equivalents, then you can choose to respond in either language (not both). If you’re applying to study one language you’re already studying and a language you’ll be starting from scratch, then you should respond in the language you are already studying. It is not a fill-the-gaps exercise or a verb conjugation test, or a translation. We want to see how well you can express yourself freely in the foreign language.

If you take a look at the Marking Criteria, you can see that when we assess your use of the foreign language we want to see a level of accuracy that we would expect to see in a student at your level of study – we’re not expecting perfection, but the best preparation you can do is make sure your grammatical knowledge is as secure as it can be. For example, you will want to ensure you know how to agree gender and number, to form verb tenses, and order a sentence correctly in the language(s) you’re studying. This will also help you for the oral element of your interviews.

The Marking Criteria for Use of the Foreign Language also allows us to reward range and complexity of the language used. In other words, this is your chance to show us how you can use different structures and show off the vocabulary you’ve learned. Use appropriate structures and language, of course, but don’t write in short, safe sentences all the time – we’ll be more impressed if you try a complicated sentence but get it slightly wrong, than with repetitive simple structures, even if they are grammatically correct.

Why test comprehension and summary? We’re not only interested in your ability to use a foreign language, but we want to be sure that what you say is relevant too. Reading a complex text like the one used for the assessment is an activity you’ll find yourself undertaking very often as an undergraduate, whether the text is in English or another language you are studying here. As a student, you’ll be engaging with ideas and putting forward arguments. Don’t worry if you’re not used to writing summaries. Here are a few basic tips:

1) read the text carefully and make sure you understand it;

2) jot down what the main points are;

3) re-write those points in your own words. Remember: this is not an exercise in translation, so you don’t need to know the exact words for an idea, but instead think how you might explain it;

4) remember also to tell us that you are writing about a text. Use the foreign language equivalents of phrases such as The author suggests… or The text states…. Notice that you’re mostly going to be using the present tense.
5) don’t include your opinion in a summary, but save that for the second part of Section A where you are asked to express whether you agree or disagree with the points made.

**What is Section B all about?** In this section you write your answer in English. While an undergraduate degree in languages does involve extending your writing skills in foreign languages, you’ll also find yourself writing in English about many things such as books, films, history and philosophy, drawing on ideas you’ll read about and hear about in lectures. So here you can show us your skills in recognising how language is used; although you are writing in English you’ll also find that this is valuable practice for engaging with texts in other languages too.

It’s important to remember that we don’t expect you to know any special literary terms for describing writing styles or rhetorical devices – if you know some and can use them correctly, that’s good, but if not don’t worry; as you can see from the marking criteria we’re far more interested in seeing whether you can spot how the author of the text writes to persuade the reader to agree with his or her ideas. Some tips:

1) read through the passage again and think about the main points you identified when answering Section A. How did you know they were main points? Where did they come in the paragraph/structure of the text? How did the author signal that they were important points?

2) look closely at how the text begins and how the author establishes the text’s theme. If the text includes more than one paragraph, is there a shift in point of view with the new paragraph? How are the paragraphs linked? Does the author pose questions? Does he or she present an idea but then immediately present a counter-argument? Does the author use technical language? Does he or she use emotive language, revealing something of the author’s personal view? These are just some questions to think about, but you will most likely think of others.

Half the marks for Section B are not for what you say, but how you communicate your observations to us. So don’t write down a list of observations in order of lines 1-30 of the text, but group together the most common observations you make and talk about them together. Plan your response so that you explain clearly what is most important in the text and why. Keep an eye on the time too to make sure you have time to complete this task – a very short or obviously unfinished answer won’t score a high mark!

**What other things can I do?** Most important of all is to feel calm and prepared. Make sure you know where your test will take place and what time you need to be there. Use one of the sample tests to practice answering the questions in one hour. As said before, revise key grammar points in your chosen language(s) of study. Take a look also at resources such as HE+ - [http://www.myheplus.com/subjects/modern-languages](http://www.myheplus.com/subjects/modern-languages) - designed by the University of Cambridge especially for students at your level, to extend their knowledge beyond the classroom.

And remember, the written assessment is just one factor among many that will help us decide whether to offer you a place to study here!