

BO1.1. History of Mathematics: a user's guide

Christopher Hollings*

2026–2027

Contents

1	Introduction	2
1.1	What history of mathematics is not	2
1.2	What history of mathematics is	3
2	Course structure	4
2.1	Lecture course	4
2.2	Reading course	5
3	Assessment	5
3.1	Examination	5
3.2	Extended essay	7
4	Advice	8
4.1	Reading and note-taking	9
4.2	Writing an essay	9
4.3	Bibliographies and references	12
4.4	Plagiarism	15
4.5	Marking	16
4.6	Preparing for discussions	17
5	Evaluating online resources	17

*Adapted from notes originally written by Jacqueline A. Stedall with input from Eleanor Robson and subsequently modified by Peter M. Neumann. Further changes by Brigitte Stenhouse have latterly been incorporated.

1 Introduction

There are many benefits to studying the history of mathematics. First and foremost is the extra colour that it adds to your mathematical studies: after years of hearing about particular ideas and name-checking various people, you may be just a little curious about where these ideas came from, and who these people were. What were they thinking about when they developed their mathematics and proved their theorems? What was going on around them to spark these ideas? Did they even prove the results that we attribute to them, or are things a bit more complicated? In any discipline, we lose something if we simply ignore the context (most particularly, the *historical* context) in which ideas arose — mathematics is no different. We gain a richer view of mathematics by considering the varied ways in which it has emerged in other cultures, and broaden our viewpoint by recognising that the way in which we do mathematics is not the only way in which it can be done.

An understanding of the history of mathematics can also aid in the comprehension of mathematics itself. When we learn mathematics, we learn it in a modern, polished form; the concepts have been clearly defined for us, and the theorems have already been given their neatest possible formulation (at least according to current sensibilities). But this is usually not how the ideas developed in the first place, and by looking at where they came from, and by considering the often faltering and frequently messy steps that mathematicians took towards an understanding of these ideas, we may gain a greater intuition for *why* the definitions are given as they are nowadays, and *why* the theorems are stated in their modern forms. Moreover, it is reassuring to see that the mathematicians of the past did not have all the right answers straight away!

But the history of mathematics is not merely an aid to mathematical studies — it is a discipline in its own right, very closely related to mathematics, but not the same. An understanding of mathematics is certainly necessary in order to be able to do the history of mathematics properly, but there is very much more to the study of the history of mathematics than technical detail. In this course, we will not only explore the development of mathematics, but also the methods and attitudes that we need to adopt in order to study this development.

1.1 What history of mathematics is not

The study of history in general often suffers from a misconception that is analogous to one found in the perception of mathematics. Just as many non-mathematicians seem to think that ‘mathematics’ and ‘arithmetic’ are one and the same, so non-historians sometimes view history simply as a catalogue of dates and events. It should be stressed here and now that, like the popular view of mathematics, the general view of history is wrong: the study of history is *not* about lists of dates. We will certainly encounter dates during our study of the history of mathematics, just as someone studying mathematics will certainly encounter arithmetic, but these will merely be part of the context, and will not be an end in themselves. Moreover, contrary to what you may find in many books, the development of mathematics is not the linear story of how great mathematicians marched relentlessly towards the mathematics of today.

1.2 What history of mathematics is

When looking at the mathematics of the past, we should not expect to be able to understand it straight away. Depending on how far back we go, it will probably be written in a style and terminology entirely unlike that to which we are accustomed. Our first task, therefore, as historians of mathematics, is to interpret this mathematics. But (and this point cannot be stressed too strongly) it must be interpreted, as near as possible, *within the context in which it was written*. We cannot simply convert historical mathematics into modern terms — to do so would be to lose something of the original, and probably to distort it too. Although we hardly notice it, the symbolism that we use in modern mathematics has developed in very particular ways over many centuries, so to reinterpret historical mathematics in modern terms is to impose a modern way of thinking that is almost certainly not present in the original text. The study of the history of mathematics cannot, therefore, concern itself simply with isolated texts — we must look at the broader mathematical environment within which mathematicians worked.

Some care is needed with the word ‘mathematician’. The idea of a professional mathematician is a relatively modern one. Many of the figures that we will encounter during the course pursued mathematics simply as a hobby. Others would not necessarily have identified themselves as mathematicians, but rather as scholars of a broader type. Here then is another reason to look closely at the context of historical mathematics: the people producing it did not necessarily consider themselves to be mathematicians, and, as a consequence, it probably did not emerge in the same way that mathematics develops today. Moreover, to pick up on a point made at the end of the preceding subsection, the history of mathematics is not simply the story of the major figures who are still remembered today: it is a much broader picture, featuring figures who are now largely forgotten, but whose contributions are nonetheless a vital part of the story. We are able to uncover a much richer story if we are prepared to adopt a liberal definition of ‘mathematician’.

As already indicated, the history of mathematics is messy, despite the fact that most general accounts of it are neatly packaged as straightforward linear stories. The historian of mathematics Jacqueline Stedall, who was one of the original creators of this course, and whose work will be cited frequently within it,¹ spoke out against this view that ‘mathematics somehow progresses only by means of “great and significant works” and “substantial changes”’:

Fortunately, the truth is far more subtle and far more interesting: mathematics is the result of a cumulative endeavour to which many people have contributed, and not only through their successes but through half-formed thoughts, tentative proposals, partially worked solutions, and even outright failure. No part of mathematics came to birth in the form that it now appears in a modern textbook: mathematical creativity can be slow, sometimes messy, often frustrating.²

Our task as historians of mathematics is to make sense of this tangled tale.

¹Indeed, if you have not already done so, you might like to read the following book, which gives a very good introduction to the history of mathematics and was written with the same ethos as this course: [Jacqueline A. Stedall, *The history of mathematics: a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2012.](#)

²Jacqueline A. Stedall, [From Cardano’s great art to Lagrange’s reflections: filling a gap in the history of algebra](#), European Mathematical Society, 2011, p. ix.

2 Course structure

As you know from the course outline, this is a double unit that consists of two parts: a lecture course in Michaelmas Term, followed by a reading course in Hilary Term. The two parts are weighted equally towards the final mark. Broadly speaking, the purpose of the lecture course is to acquaint you with the history of the mathematics that you have met during the core courses of your first four terms in Oxford. For the most part, this translates into the history of European mathematics from around 1600 to 1900 (although some parts of the course do spill outside this geographical and temporal range). No such restrictions are placed on the Hilary Term reading course, however.

A great emphasis of both parts of the course is the use of *primary materials*: we will always endeavour to read the original works of historical mathematicians (in translation, where necessary). A useful structure that we will employ when analysing historical mathematical texts is to consider the *context*, *content*, and *significance* of each text that we study:

Context: When, where and for whom was the piece written? What mathematical background does it assume?

Content: What does the text contain? Are there any parts that are particularly difficult or tricky? Is the argument convincing? How does it differ, if at all, from the way in which this mathematics is presented nowadays?

Contemporary Significance: How was this text received at the time it was written? Who read the text, or was influenced by it?

Historical Significance: What can this text tell us about the way mathematics was practiced at the time? How important has the text been in the historical development of mathematics?

Indeed, 'context, content, significance' will be our mantra throughout both parts of the course. You may find our use of the word 'significance' a little slippery: we use it in the senses described above to ask where a historical source sits within a wider story, and not merely to assess whether it is 'important' in an absolute sense.

2.1 Lecture course

In common with your other lecture courses in Michaelmas Term, this is given as a series of 16 lectures, which begin with a brief introduction to mathematics pre-1600, before moving to the main course material. The two mainstays of your mathematical education to date have been analysis and linear algebra, but the history of linear algebra can be slightly problematic (for reasons which we will explore in the course), so it is relegated to a single lecture near the end. The main thrust of the course is therefore the development of calculus, through to analysis, and eventually the birth of set theory. Nevertheless, other topics will appear along the way, such as algebra, geometry, and number theory. You will be assigned reading to do throughout the term. The lectures and the reading will cover much of the same ground, but with a different perspective: while the reading gives you much of the solid factual basis that you need for the

course, the purpose of the lectures is to point out important interconnections and overarching themes, and to reflect on the ways in which we can study this history.

In place of the problem sheets that you have for your other lecture courses, you will be set essay questions and be asked to prepare certain other topics for presentation or discussion. As with other courses, the lectures are supported by four intercollegiate classes of an hour and a half each. You will be asked to hand in essays (of 1,000 words) in advance of these classes, which will then be marked and returned to you for discussion in the class.³ In each class, we will deal not only with the content of the essays, bringing out any interesting points that people have made, but also with essay-writing techniques (on which, see Section 4). You will also be expected to speak on the discussion topics that have been set prior to the class, and may also be asked to make a small presentation on a subject that you have been given. Overall, the intercollegiate classes will provide a highly interactive forum for you to ask questions, try out ideas, or argue your point of view.

2.2 Reading course

In the reading course, we will consider one particular topic in more depth than in the lecture course, with the emphasis still on the use of primary sources: this will be an opportunity for you to apply everything that you have learnt so far about how to study the history of mathematics. The topic this year will be traditional Chinese mathematical texts, with a particular focus on the *Nine chapters on the mathematical art* 九章算術, which was compiled over many centuries before reaching its recognised form in the first century CE. A number of core readings will be set, but the expectation is that you will go out and find additional materials for yourselves. Further details will be made available at the end of Michaelmas Term.

Your reading throughout Hilary Term will be supported by weekly discussion sessions of an hour and a half each; these will function very much like the classes of Michaelmas Term: as a place for you to ask questions and to discuss your findings. Three essays (each of 2,000 words) will be set during the term. As before, these will be marked and returned to you for discussion in the classes. These build towards the extended coursework essay.

3 Assessment

3.1 Examination

The lecture course is assessed by a two-hour examination paper in Trinity Term; the paper consists of two halves. The first (Section A) is 'Extracts', in which you are invited to comment on the 'context', 'content', and 'significance' of a series of short extracts from historical mathematical texts: six are provided, from which you must choose two. The second part of the exam paper (Section B) features a choice of essay questions, usually a selection of three topics, from which you must choose one. The rule of thumb is therefore that you should be looking to spend around half an hour on each of your chosen extracts, and an hour on the essay question.

³Please note that I will take a hard line over deadlines, but extensions will usually be granted if asked for.

One of the best ways to prepare for the exam is to work through past papers, many of which are available through the Mathematical Institute website, along with sketch solutions for selected years. This course was first examined in 2004, and all past exam questions back to that year remain relevant, with the exception of those relating to the history of probability theory, which was dropped from the course some years ago. During the first half of Trinity Term, there will be consultation sessions in which we will go through exam questions together.

The examination papers are independently double-marked, and the two assessors then meet to agree upon the mark for each candidate; this reconciliation process results in the final mark for the exam — there is no rescaling, unlike with other courses. The exam paper is marked according to the criteria below.

- The 25 marks that are available for each of the Section A questions are broken down as follows:
 - 5 marks for a thorough and accurate interpretation and description of the content of the extract; better responses to this part of the question (3+) will not merely reproduce what is written in the examination paper, but will also comment upon such points as the form that the extract takes, the style of language, the choice of terminology, etc.;
 - 10 marks for placing the extract accurately into its proper context, both mathematical and historical; the assessors will award higher marks (6+) for answers that discuss a range of aspects of the background of the extract, including the mathematical ideas that had come before, prior publications to which this extract responds, and the circumstances of the author; better answers (7+) will give some indication of *why* the relevant text was written, and thereby will include some comment on the source from which the extract is drawn, as indicated in the reference given at the end;
 - 10 marks for a discussion of the wider ‘significance’ of the extract, placing it into the longer story of the development of the relevant mathematical ideas, principally by describing subsequent developments, and the responses or lack of responses to the extract; recall that the word ‘significance’ was used throughout the lecture course in the broad sense of ‘where does this text fit into the historical picture?’, rather than simply ‘how important is it?’; candidates are expected to address this wider sense, and the higher range of marks (6+) will only be available to those candidates who do so; candidates reaching the upper parts of this range (8+) will acknowledge convincingly that the judgement as to how ‘significant’ a text is can change over time.
- The 50 marks that are available for each of the Section B questions are broken down as follows:
 - 10 marks for the organisation of the essay; the assessors acknowledge that it is not possible to produce a polished essay under examination conditions, but nevertheless

expect candidates to plan out their essay in advance; in awarding marks in the upper part of this range (6+), the assessors will be looking for essays that are coherent, make their point(s) clearly, and employ an appropriate structure (which in many cases will simply be chronological); it should be relatively easy for candidates to attain a high score within this segment of the marks;

- 20 marks for displaying an understanding of the relevant topic; this should include a solid command of the factual content (both mathematical and historical), as well as an awareness of the wider context of the ideas under discussion; candidates will be penalised for the inclusion of material that has no relevance to the overall argument; essays will need to be free of factual error and irrelevance to attain marks of 12+ in this segment; to reach the upper part of this range (15+), candidates will need to provide some historical analysis of the ideas under discussion, rather than simply giving a narrative; the highest marks (19+) will be given for essays that offer original insight;
- 20 marks for the accuracy and range of examples or evidence given; candidates ought to provide appropriate evidence to support the points that they make in their essay, and will be penalised where this is lacking; candidates need not include formal citations in their essays, but they are expected to provide enough information to make it clear to which text they are referring; essays that feature unsupported speculation or unclear references are unlikely to be awarded more than 12 marks in this segment; higher marks (15+) will be awarded to those candidates who are able to support their arguments by a range of appropriate evidence.

3.2 Extended essay

The reading course is assessed by a 3,000-word extended coursework essay. The topic, related to the term's reading, is given out at the beginning of 7th week of Hilary Term; the essay is due in by 12 noon on the Tuesday of 10th week. The classes in 7th and 8th weeks are devoted largely to any questions you might have about the preparation of the extended essay.

Every part of the essay except the bibliography is included in the word count — in particular, *all footnotes or endnotes are included*. The official rubric for the extended essays allows a tolerance of 3,000 words $\pm 10\%$, but this is not an invitation to produce an essay of 3,300 words — the purpose of the $\pm 10\%$ (of rather, of the $+10\%$) is to avoid worry over unexpected sources of extra words, such as subheadings. You should aim for roughly 3,000 words and save yourself the need for painful last-minute cuts.

Just like the exam paper, the extended essays are independently double-marked, and the two assessors then meet to agree upon the final mark for each candidate. The marking criteria will appear in the Examination Conventions, but it is useful to reproduce them here in full:

70–100*	The candidate shows clear focus on the question, with precise and accurate details (mathematical and other), imaginative selection of examples and appropriate selection and quality (rather than quantity) of sources, and cogent argument, supported by evidence.
60–69	Work that addresses the given topic, with solid command of factual content, reasonable range of examples and sources, coherent argument and analysis, and correct referencing and bibliography. (Essays at the lower end of this range may lack some of these qualities or show them only intermittently.)
50–59	Work with some use of facts, sources, and arguments, but marred by one or more of a failure to address the topic, serious or frequent errors of fact, a high proportion of indiscriminate information, speculation or unsupported argument, and incomplete or inaccurate referencing.
40–49	The candidate shows some knowledge of the topic but the work is marred by several of the following: high levels of error or irrelevance, muddled or superficial ideas, incoherent or non-existent argument, incompetent use of sources, or very poor writing style.
30–39	The work demonstrates a little knowledge of the topic but no coherent argument.
0–29	The work demonstrates almost no knowledge of the topic.

*Within this band the following finer gradations may be helpful:

90–100	Work of publishable quality.
80–89	Demonstrates originality of content or insight. Work at the upper end of this range could be publishable after minor improvements. Would be an appropriate entry for a national or university prize.
70–79	Work of high or very high quality, but perhaps lacking the originality that would be expected of publishable work. Might be a good candidate, for example, for a college prize.

A common pitfall with the extended essays is the over-reliance on secondary sources — the use of primary sources should be a major part of your writing. Another point worth making is that although it can enliven an essay to include well-chosen quotations from the primary sources, you should not do this to excess — the assessors want to hear your voice.

4 Advice

Many of you will not have written an essay since you were at school and you are likely to feel a little daunted the first time you attempt it. Nevertheless, you have opted to take this course, which means that you have already cleared the first hurdle — that of having the confidence to

want to try. As already noted, you will eventually have to write a formally assessed extended essay for this course, as well as shorter essays under exam conditions, but don't worry — by the time you get to these, you will have had two terms' worth of practice and feedback on your essay-writing. In addition to this, the following notes are intended to help you to get the most out of the course overall. Moreover, the development of the skills described here, such as efficient reading or fluent writing, will stand you in good stead more generally, whatever you go on to do in the future.

4.1 Reading and note-taking

Reading for pleasure is effortless, but if you really want to learn from what you read, you have to work at it. Reading without taking notes is largely a waste of time: you will simply find yourself coming back to the same chapter or article and having to digest it all over again, so get into the habit right from the start of thinking about and organising the material as you go along. If you have the time, you might like to consider reading the material twice: once without taking notes to gain an overall impression, and then again (immediately) to make notes on the important points. The extra time taken to read through the material twice should be balanced out by greater efficiency in making notes.

We learn by creating images or structures in our minds which allow us to add or absorb new material. When you read, you need to work out what are the essential messages, the key points that you need to incorporate into your own mental model. This is a process you should be carrying out all the time you are reading, though it may take more than one pass through the material before you can sift out the most important issues. These will also be pointed out in the lectures.

There are two ways of recording what you want to remember. One is to highlight words or sentences in the text. A serious drawback to this, however, is that the words you highlight are not your own. It is very much better to process the ideas through your own mind and hand, so the second and preferred method is, as you reach the end of each paragraph or section, to list the essential points from what you have read, either as bullet points or as a few short clear sentences. Such notes will not only help you to assimilate the material but will be an invaluable revision tool later on. If you employ both methods mentioned here, be sure to keep a clear separation in your notes between your own words and those of the authors whom you are reading, in order to guard against inadvertent plagiarism (see Section 4.4).

Always make a note of page or section references, so that you can find your way back to the relevant passages if you need to. Indeed, you may need to cite specific page or section numbers in your essays, so it is useful to have them to hand — an aspect of essay-writing that will be stressed below (Section 4.3) is the need for accurate bibliographies and references.

4.2 Writing an essay

An essay is your written response to a question that has been posed to you. It often helps to imagine your reader as someone who does not have all the information that you have but who is intelligent enough to follow your argument as long as you explain your ideas clearly. The

following notes are intended to help you to create a fluent and readable essay; also, looking ahead, the following points reflect aspects of essay-writing that the assessors will want to see when they come to mark your coursework.

- *Answer the question*

Start by writing down the correct essay question in full, and refer back to it frequently as you read and plan so that you focus on what is relevant and avoid what is not. Make sure you address all the issues the question suggests. Even the most interesting and beautifully written essay will be marked harshly if it does not actually address the question at hand.

- *Research*

Gather your information from reliable sources. Chapters from books or articles from respectable journals will have undergone a rigorous process of peer-review. This is not necessarily true of other sources found online, which can vary wildly. Read Section 5 on 'Evaluating online resources' and consider just how many questions you need to ask and answer before you can accept a source as reliable. You may think it less work to go back to books. Always cross-check the facts if you can and weigh up the evidence for yourself. Complete agreement between authors is usually rather dull, whereas differing views and opinions can be a good starting point for your own discussion.

- *Plan*

Organise your thoughts carefully before you begin to write. Which parts of your material help to address the question? How are you going to arrange them? Give yourself two or three subheadings (but no more than that) and list the main points you want to make under each of them in a sensible order. Then write your essay around this outline.

- *Maintain a structure*

All essays need a basic structure of beginning-middle-end. The beginning is your introduction: say what you are going to write about and why you consider it important or interesting. For a short essay this need be no more than a paragraph. The middle of your essay will consist of your subheaded sections, each containing explanations or arguments separated into paragraphs. Finally, you should draw the threads of the essay together and give your overall conclusion. Never introduce new ideas at this point. As with the introduction, the conclusion will usually be a single paragraph.

- *Show your understanding*

Show that you understand the ideas you are writing about by expressing them in your own words. Quotes from other authors should be used only if they are absolutely essential (as a starting point for discussion, for instance), but not as a substitute for your own writing. Don't wander out of your depth – this can happen very easily in mathematics. There is nothing wrong with stating that certain topics are beyond the scope of your essay, but if you try to write about things you don't understand you will end up writing nonsense.

- *Support your opinions with evidence*

An essay needs to present a convincing explanation or argument, just as a mathematical proof does. Don't make general statements unless you can support them with firm evidence, not hearsay or anecdote. The evidence might come from your reading of primary sources, or from other authorities (whom you must acknowledge). Where you observe different methods or opinions, present the strengths and weaknesses of each. You may in the end come down on one side or the other, but your reader should understand why. Remember that it is OK to disagree with the things that you have read, provided you can support your view in some way.

- *Make your essay easy to read*

The ability to write lucid and accurate English is immeasurably important (and will benefit you long after you leave Oxford). Aiming to write clearly will almost certainly help you to think clearly, whether you are doing mathematics or constructing an essay. Unless you are very confident of your writing style, keep to short sentences, and straightforward constructions. Use words you know you understand, and that are appropriate for a formal essay. Try reading your essay aloud — to yourself or to a friend — to be sure it makes sense. Are there passages that you could rewrite more simply or more directly? Could some of your sentences be cut in two? Appropriate images or diagrams can help to illustrate a point but be sure they are relevant, not just decorations for your essay. Take care not to use too many footnotes, as these can be rather distracting for the reader.

- *Acknowledge your sources*

Whenever you use evidence, arguments, or quotations from other people's work, you must acknowledge your source. This is an aspect of essay-writing whose importance cannot be stressed enough: think of the references in your essay as being like the proofs in your mathematical work — they cannot be left out. We will return to bibliographies and references in Section 4.3.

- *Insert mathematics carefully*

It is expected that your essays will contain some mathematics — how much to include will depend on the particular topic, and will require a judgement on your part. Any mathematics that you include should of course be accurate, and should be typeset in a consistent manner. Always use *italics* for mathematical letters. If you are using Word, you can employ the built-in equation-generating features, but these are only satisfactory for very small amounts of mathematics. For more extended mathematical writing it is better to use $\text{\LaTeX}$, which is not difficult to learn and gives a much more professional-looking document (these notes have been produced in $\text{\LaTeX}$).⁴ Note that Part C dissertations *must* be written in $\text{\LaTeX}$, so it is worthwhile starting to learn how to use it now.

⁴See the Mathematical Institute's guide to $\text{\LaTeX}$: <https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/members/it/faqs/latex>; introductory lectures on $\text{\LaTeX}$ will be held during Michaelmas Term. See also the advice on how to access Overleaf, an online $\text{\LaTeX}$ editor, or how to install a local version of $\text{\LaTeX}$ on your own machine: <https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/members/it/faqs/latex/getting-latex>.

- *Respect the word count*

You should regard the word count not as your enemy, but as a very helpful indication of the required level of detail. For instance, you may find it challenging to address the Michaelmas Term essay topics within the required 1,000 words — but one of the reasons for setting such short essays is to help you to concentrate your thoughts. In general, if you have written too little, you may have missed out some key elements of the essay. If you have written too much, you have waffled or strayed from the point. Trimming out excess verbiage will always improve your writing and it is better to be under the word limit than over it. A common pitfall is to use up too many words telling the reader what you are about to say, rather than just getting on and saying it.

- *Proof-read*

Proof-read your essay carefully for errors that your spellcheck will have missed, like ‘form’ for ‘from’. Spelling of historical names can vary greatly; it is suggested that you follow the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* or the *Dictionary of scientific biography*. Book and journal titles should always appear in *italics*, but article titles in ‘single quotes’. In book titles, capitalise only the first letter and proper names (this is a style known as ‘sentence case’).

- *Tidy up the details*

Try to make your essay look good on the page. Make your name (or for formally assessed work, your candidate number) easily visible at the top of the first page. Make your title and subheadings clear but not elaborate. Give your essay breathing space: your reader will appreciate size 12 font, reasonable line spacing, and margins wide enough to write in. Avoid bad page breaks such as headings separated from their paragraphs, or breaks in the middle of a quote or a mathematical argument. Place figures and diagrams close to the relevant text or else on separate pages at the end; in either case give clear references: ‘see figure 2’, for example. Insert page numbers if they are not there already.

To help you develop your own style, and of course to learn more about the history of mathematics, you might like to browse *The Oxford handbook of the history of mathematics* (OUP, 2009), which contains many examples of well-written articles about various aspects of the history of mathematics. The chapters are longer than most undergraduate essays but are nevertheless an excellent guide to structure, style, and layout, not to mention referencing. *Practice*, of which you will have much, is an important part of developing your style — to reiterate, every essay you write will receive detailed feedback, and essay-writing guidance will be part of each intercollegiate class.

4.3 Bibliographies and references

As noted above, a bibliography should be viewed as an absolutely essential part of your writing — essays that lack a bibliography will be marked harshly. Your bibliography should include all works referred to in the essay (and only those), listed in alphabetical order by name of the

first author. You might like to subdivide your bibliography into primary and secondary sources, or into books, articles, and online resources (for example), but this is not essential. There are many bibliographical styles in use in academic publishing, but the following formats are suggested. For each type of resource, you should include all the information that your reader would need to locate this item for themselves.

- *Books*: include author(s) or editor(s), the book title (in italics), the publisher, and the year of publication. For pre-twentieth-century books it is conventional to give place of publication; for modern books the publisher alone will suffice. If there are multiple editions of the book, then you should specify which one you have used. Examples:
 - John Fauvel, Raymond Flood, Robin Wilson (eds.), *Oxford figures: eight centuries of the mathematical sciences*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2013
 - Victor J. Katz, *A history of mathematics*, brief edition, Pearson Addison Wesley, 2004
 - John Wallis, *Arithmetica infinitorum*, Oxford, 1656
- *Articles*: these might be articles in journals, or they might be articles in collections published in book form (such as *The Oxford handbook of the history of mathematics*, mentioned above). For journal articles, give the author(s), the title of the article (in single quotes), the name of the journal (in italics), the volume number of the journal, the year, and the page range of the article within that volume. Different journals use different systems of numbering, so you may need to be flexible in how you format your bibliography. For instance, some journals don't use volume numbers and are identified only by year. Other journals subdivide their volumes into issues, and while it may not be strictly necessary to specify an issue number when identifying an article (the volume number will usually be enough), it is good practice to give this nonetheless, as it can make looking up the article much easier. For newspaper articles, you will need to give a full date, rather than just the year. For articles in books, give the author(s), the article title (in single quotes), the book title (in italics), the book's editors, the publisher/place of publication, the year of publication, and the page range of the article within the book. Examples:
 - Keith Hannabuss, 'Mathematics in Victorian Oxford: a tale of three professors', in *Mathematics in Victorian Britain* (Raymond Flood, Adrian C. Rice, Robin Wilson, eds.), Oxford University Press, 2011, 35–50
 - Eleanor Robson, 'Neither Sherlock Holmes nor Babylon: a reassessment of Plimpton 322', *Historia mathematica* 28(3) (2001), 167–206⁵
- *Webpages*: although you should prioritise traditionally published materials such as books or journals as (usually) being the more reliable sources, you might occasionally cite webpages that satisfy the criteria laid out in Section 5. In particular, many traditional resources, such as the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* now have convenient online

⁵NB. The volume number here is 28, the issue number is 3.

versions. When listing an online resource in your bibliography, you should (where applicable) give the author(s), title (in single quotes), name of the overall website (in italics), the URL, and the access date. If no author is given, then place the item at the top of the bibliography, with similar such items ordered alphabetically by title. Examples:

- ‘Augustus De Morgan (English mathematician and logician)’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Augustus-De-Morgan> (accessed 21 September 2023)
- *Byrne’s Euclid*, <https://www.c82.net/euclid/> (accessed 6 August 2025)
- Mary R. S. Creese, ‘Somerville [née Fairfax; other married name Greig], Mary (1780–1872), science writer and mathematics expositor’, *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/26024> (accessed 6 August 2025)

A comment on URLs: always try to give a stable link or DOI (Digital Object Identifier, a type of URL, such as in the Mary Somerville example above, that is assigned to some online resources — see Section 5). Although URLs may also be available for the books and articles that you cite and can therefore be included in the bibliography, it is only online resources for which this is essential.

As you research your essays, you will probably come across other types of resources, such as translations or PhD dissertations, that don’t fit into the above categories. The formatting of these within the bibliography can usually be dealt with in an *ad hoc* manner — consider what essential information needs to be given, pick a sensible layout, and apply it consistently.

Just as there are several ways to format your bibliography, there are also several ways to cite the bibliography entries in your essay. A common method, particularly in mathematical writing, and one that is the default in $\text{\LaTeX}$, is to number the entries in your bibliography, and then cite these in the text as, for example, [1, p. 27]. This, however, has the drawback that the reader must then refer constantly to the bibliography to find out what the numbers stand for. A preferred way of giving citations in historical writing is therefore to use the author-year style, whereby you refer more transparently to, for example, (Hannabuss 2011, p. 40). You can do this either by including a footnote,⁶ or else by inserting the reference in brackets, for example: (Katz 2004, pp. 216–232). In either case you need give only author, year, and the page number or range to which you are referring — you do not need to give the full reference every time, as these details can be found in the bibliography. For resources that don’t have an author listed, choose a sensible identifier, for example, (*Byrne’s Euclid* 2025).

A comment on page ranges: the bibliography should contain only the ‘global’ details of each item cited; if you want to refer to a specific page within one of your sources, then the place for this is in a citation within the main text. For example, in the case of Robson (2001), we give the full page range of the article 167–206 in the bibliography, and then if we want to refer to something specifically on p. 200, we place a citation (Robson 2001, p. 200) in the essay.

⁶For example, Wallis (1656, pp. 91–92).

A question that is often asked by those students who write their essays in $\text{\LaTeX}$ is whether they should use $\text{\LaTeX}$'s built-in bibliography management tool, $\text{\BibTeX}$. The short answer is: don't. $\text{\BibTeX}$ is a wonderful tool for writing large documents with lengthy bibliographies, but for short essays with only a handful of references, it is more trouble than it is worth — it is easier simply to edit your bibliography manually.

4.4 Plagiarism

The university defines plagiarism in the following terms:

Presenting work or ideas from another source as your own, with or without consent of the original author, by incorporating it into your work without full acknowledgement. [...] Plagiarism can also include re-using your own work without citation. Under the regulations for examinations, intentional or reckless plagiarism is a disciplinary offence.⁷

Your essays should make clear to what extent any substantial section is derived from another source. Any exact quotation from published or unpublished works must be clearly identified, and you should give a reference. Equally, if you summarise another person's ideas, judgements, figures, or diagrams, a reference to that person or the source should be made in the text and the source should be included in the bibliography. This includes material published on a website. The university maintains a useful webpage which contains advice on how to avoid plagiarism.⁸ There is also an online course entitled 'Avoiding Plagiarism', which you are asked to complete ahead of the first intercollegiate class.⁹ As you may be aware, the university runs samples of submitted coursework through the 'Turnitin' software, which compares the work with a database of relevant materials (drawn, for example, from online essay banks) to check for any matches.

A simple way to avoid accidental plagiarism is to be scrupulous in your note-taking. Write down all the details of the author, title, publisher, date, and page numbers before you start to read. Note the number of each new page or section as you get to it. Make notes in your own words, don't simply copy the author's. If you do quote word-for-word in your notes, then mark that quote explicitly, so that you do not inadvertently mistake it for your own.

Questions of the appropriate use of generative AI fall naturally under this heading. While the university permits the use of GenAI in supporting learning, it is also very clear that any such use must be declared, and that it cannot be used substantially in work for assessment. The university maintains a webpage on the appropriate use of GenAI,¹⁰ and the Mathematical Institute's own policy can also be found online.¹¹

⁷<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism?wssl=1>

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹<https://cosy.ox.ac.uk/accessplan/LMSPortal/UI/Page/Courses/book.aspx?courseid=EPICE018&referrer=coursesearch>

¹⁰<https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/life/it/genai-tools/guidance-on-safe-and-responsible-use-of-genai>

¹¹<https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/members/students/departmental-and-university-regulations>

4.5 Marking

When marking your essays, we will be looking at how well they address the given question, usually within the framework mentioned earlier: 'context', 'content', 'significance'. 'Context' and 'significance' will normally be given equal weighting, with a little less credit being given for the treatment of 'content', since this should be one of the easiest parts of the essay. Some consideration is given to presentation, though not to the level of, say, penalising missing commas. Poor presentation usually goes hand in hand with poor understanding, so it is the latter that will lose you credit, rather than the former. You might also find it useful to read the relevant sections of previous Examiners' Reports.

The essays that you write during Michaelmas and Hilary Terms (that is, the essays that are not formally assessed) will be marked according to the α, β, γ -system that is often employed in Oxford for marking tutorial work, but that is rarely explained. For the record, the available grades, in descending order of attainment are:

$$\alpha^+, \alpha, \alpha^-, \alpha\beta, \beta\alpha, \beta^+, \beta, \beta^-, \beta\gamma, \gamma\beta, \gamma^+, \gamma, \gamma^-.$$

The α , β and γ correspond roughly to the first, second and third classes, but the purpose of this system is to stop you getting hung up on numerical scores, and to give you a more qualitative impression of how your work is progressing. It may nevertheless be useful to refer to the following descriptors:

α^+	For essays that are absolutely perfect and free of any blemish whatsoever, and clearly go beyond what was expected.
α	The essay focuses clearly on the question, with precise and accurate details (mathematical and historical), imaginative selection of examples and appropriate choice and quality (rather than quantity) of sources, and cogent argument, supported by evidence. For essay topics that are more open (such as those in Hilary Term), the essay securely fits the guiding brief, is of appropriate scope, and is innovative.
$\alpha-$	As for α , but very slightly lacking in some aspects.
$\alpha\beta$	For essays that certainly belong to the α -level, but only just.
$\beta\alpha$	For essays that certainly belong to the β -level, but which could be lifted to α with only minimal modification.
$\beta+$	A particularly strong β -level essay, but still lacking the originality to lift it to α .
β	Work that addresses the given topic, with solid command of factual content, reasonable range of examples and sources, coherent argument and analysis, and correct referencing and bibliography. An essay falling into this bracket will, however, lack the innovation needed to lift it to α .
$\beta-$	As for β , but very slightly lacking in some aspects.

$\beta\gamma$	For essays that display some of the good points of the β -level, but which are marred by mild versions of the points listed under γ : parts of the essay stray from the topic at hand, minor factual errors, referencing is present but poorly done.
$\gamma\beta$	Similar to $\beta\gamma$, but the γ -level problems with the essay outweigh the positive β -level points.
$\gamma+$	For essays that are marred by some of the points under γ , but which nevertheless display good aspects that deserve some small credit.
γ	Work with some use of facts, sources, and arguments, but marred by some of the following: a failure to address the topic, serious or frequent errors of fact, a high proportion of indiscriminate information, speculation or unsupported argument, incomplete or inaccurate referencing.
$\gamma-$	The work demonstrates little or no knowledge of the topic and/or lacks any coherent argument.

4.6 Preparing for discussions

Our classes in both Michaelmas and Hilary Terms will be very interactive affairs. They are intended as discussion sessions to which everyone is expected to contribute. The topics of the essays will be discussed, and you will also be given other subjects to prepare for discussion in the classes. In order for the classes to flow freely, it is important that you do indeed prepare these subjects — but you should already have covered these in the reading, so it should take only a little extra effort to ready yourself to discuss them out loud. Some people might be a little anxious at the thought of speaking in front of the rest of the class, but the key to gaining confidence in doing so is preparation: make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with the assigned topic, and you are unlikely to go wrong. You might find it useful to have a few relevant bullet-points noted down in front of you, which you can then volunteer at an appropriate moment. We genuinely want to hear everyone's thoughts on the material at hand, so don't be timid, and tell us what you think!

5 Evaluating online resources

As has already been mentioned, you should take care over which sources you trust, and this point is particularly critical when it comes to online resources, which often have not gone through any kind of refereeing or fact-checking process. Exceptions are the online versions of traditional publications such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, and you will hopefully become familiar with these and other reliable sources as the course progresses. Academic journals are another type of resource that has its roots in traditional publishing, but which is increasingly visible first and foremost online. One of the ways in which journal articles (and, indeed, online versions of books) can be distinguished from

other, potentially more ephemeral, online materials is the presence of a DOI (as mentioned above in Section 4.3), usually as part of a stable URL. This is also the place to mention such encyclopaedic online references as Wikipedia and MacTutor. Although these are broadly reliable, there is always an element of doubt, so you should avoid listing them in your bibliography. What they are nevertheless useful for is as a starting point for research — the references on MacTutor are particularly good for pointing you towards safer literature.

The following points are to help you in your evaluation of the reliability of any online resources that you might find.¹² They are also easily adapted to any other types of sources.

1. Traditional evaluation criteria:

- authority;
- purpose;
- coverage;
- accuracy;
- objectivity;
- currency.

Don't believe everything you read. Details to find out:

- who hosts the webpage?
- is the writer an authority on the subject?
- why is the material online, and to whom it is addressed?
- is the content accurate, reliable, objective, and current?
- does the layout and design of the webpage support the information it contains?

Critical parts of a webpage:

- location (use the URL);
- information in the header (title, author/publisher);
- body (bibliography, CV included?);
- footer (who maintains the page, last updated, etc.).

2. Authority, authors and sources of information:

- who is the author of the source?
- what is the author's job title?
- is it clear whether some reputable organisation or expert is behind the resource or the author that you are consulting?
- what are the author's qualifications for writing on the subject? (Does the author have a reputation in the field? What else have they written?)
- is there any biographical information provided about the author?
- does the author provide a contact address of any sort?

3. Purpose and audience:

- why was the resource created: to inform, entertain, share information, advertise/sell, influence views, beliefs, etc.?
- who are the intended users of this resource: general readers, students (any level?), specialists or professionals, researchers or scholars?

¹²They are adapted from notes originally compiled by Grazyna Cooper, formerly of OUCS.

- is it clearly stated for whom the resource is put together, at whom it is aiming?
 - what is the purpose of the resource? Is it clearly stated?
 - does the website fulfil the stated purpose?
4. Coverage, scope, and content:
- what sort of document is it that you are looking at: a web-only page (such as a blog post), a journal article, a conference paper, creative writing, ... ?
 - are the scope and limits of the document clearly stated?
 - does the actual scope of the resource match one's expectations? (Ask yourself: 'is this useful to me?')
 - if the resource being considered is useful, does it:
 - support the argument that is of interest;
 - counter the argument;
 - give interesting and useful examples;
 - provide information that can fruitfully be challenged or argued with?
 - is the copyright situation clear?
 - how reliable and free from error is the information?
 - are there reviews of the site elsewhere to help you in your evaluation?
 - how many other sites link to this one?
5. Accuracy:
- can you verify the accuracy of this resource in any way?
 - is the methodology used in gathering information and assessing it stated by the author of this document and is it verifiable and/or clear?
 - are the data that support the argument or explain it included? Or can you find them easily for verification?
6. Objectivity:
- is the information presented with a minimum of bias (political, ideological or other)?
 - are biases and opinions clearly identified or identifiable?
 - if the publisher or author is commercial, do business concerns affect presentation of the information?
7. Currency:
- how stable is the resource?
 - when was the webpage produced, and is the original publication date clearly indicated?
 - when was it last updated?
 - is the resource regularly updated?
 - are the dates of any new material or updates (and frequency of updating) clearly stated?
 - how up-to-date are the links? How many of them still work?
8. Conclusions:
- document the source to the fullest extent possible;
 - determine the stability of the source;
 - verify information using other sources.