

Classics Preparation and Reading List 2026

Congratulations again on your offer to study Classics at St Hilda's. We hope that you will enjoy the course, which is designed to be both interesting and challenging. This document offers a range of tips to help you start to negotiate the transition from school- to university-level work before you arrive. Please do read through the whole thing: it may be that not *everything* in it will apply to you, but much of it will.

Background reading:

We are aware that some of you may not yet feel quite familiar with the ancient world in general. The historical and intellectual contexts which produced the texts you will go on to read are clearly very important, and you might like to try a few general works to help you get to grips with the basics. If you already have a fair sense of the sweep of Classical history and the vagaries of Classical mythology, feel free to pass over this section. Others, however, may like to try:

W. Allan, *Classical Literature: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2014)

A. Giesecke, *Classical Mythology A to Z* (Black Dog and Leventhal, 2020)

R. Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (Allen Lane, 2005)

H. Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2007)

S. Price and P. Thonemann, *The Birth of Classical Europe* (Penguin, 2010)

J. Quinn, *How the World Made the West: A 4,000-Year History* (Bloomsbury, 2024)

You are welcome to get in touch with Dr Armstrong (rebecca.armstrong@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk) if you would like further recommendations in this vein.

You might also find it interesting to take some virtual tours of the Classical exhibitions in various museums, especially if you have not had the opportunity to visit any in person. For example:

<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>

<http://collections.ashmolean.org/>

Reading for the summer before you start your course:

For the first two terms of the course, your main focus will be on learning / improving the languages, at the same time as starting work on the Greek and Latin literature papers. **All** students are required to take both of these literature papers; those who are not learning one of the languages will read the texts for that paper in translation. There is a range of texts on the syllabus, and you will need to be able to translate all of them (in the language/s you have studied); however, your tutors will offer tutorials on a narrower range in order for you to have time to get to grips with these complex works in an appropriately sophisticated way, in preparation for writing pre-submitted essays and producing literary commentaries in exam conditions later on in the course.

Classical literature approaches subjects and styles in a myriad of ways, but one element shared universally is an interest in the literature of the past. Two authors achieve particular prominence in this respect: Homer and Vergil. It is thus **very strongly recommended** that you should read the whole of Homer's *Iliad* and Vergil's *Aeneid* in translation before you begin your course (and if you have already read

them, there will still be great benefit in reading them again). There are many excellent translations available, so the following recommendations are *exempli gratia*:

Homer, *Iliad* – Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago press, 1961 but reprinted many times); Martin Hammond (Penguin, 1987 also reprinted); Emily Wilson (Norton & Co., 2023)

Vergil, *Aeneid* – C Day Lewis (Oxford World’s Classics reprinted many times); David West (Penguin, 1991 also reprinted); Shadi Bartsch (Profile Books, 2022)

Those of you who have already learned Latin and / or Greek should also ensure to keep the language(s) ticking over: it is alarming how quickly some elements can be forgotten during the long summer before the Oxford academic year gets going at the start of October! **Regular revision of vocabulary and paradigms is essential.**

The following texts will be studied in detail in the first two terms:

Homer, *Odyssey* books 9–12

Euripides, *Bacchae*

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

Catullus, *Carmina*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* books 7–9

You are **all** welcome to read through translations of these works in advance: there is a list of recommended translations at the end of this document.

Those of you who know Greek should read *Odyssey* book 9 in the original (and are welcome to read more if you like!) Use the Oxford Classical Text if you can: this is the version you will be expected to use on the course.

Those of you who know Latin should read Catullus poems 63 and 65–68 in the original (and are welcome to read more if you like!) For Catullus it’s particularly important to read the Oxford Classical Text edited by R. A. B. Mynors, as other texts can differ quite significantly in places. Please get in touch with Dr Armstrong if you cannot get access to this particular text, and she will provide you with a PDF of those poems.

Reading texts in the original languages:

As you will know, the Classics courses at Oxford place great emphasis on learning Greek and Latin and on reading Classical texts in those original languages. You will receive intensive training and a great deal of learning support during term times, but you will also be expected to put in a lot of work on your own. In order for students to feel ready to hit the ground running when they arrive in Oxford, therefore, we recommend that those who already have some knowledge of either or both languages should spend as much time as they are able over the summer reading some of the set texts they will encounter in their first terms.

For many of you, this is likely to be the first time you have approached an ancient text without a teacher’s guidance. Individuals differ in their approach to any task, and with time you will be sure to develop your own ways of working, but it might be helpful to use this as a rough guide when you embark on your reading.

- Firstly, find a quiet place and set aside a good chunk of time (say, one and a half to two hours) for each of your reading sessions. Turn off your phone and block out any other possible distractions as much as you can.
- If you are unfamiliar with the text, start by reading an English translation. This will give you a good sense of what you're dealing with, both in terms of the plot / subject matter and in terms of tone and vocabulary range. Do not, however, assume that by reading the English and then glancing at the Latin or Greek you will automatically understand exactly how the texts work in detail. This is only the first step in the process.
- Next, put aside the published translation and look carefully at a small chunk of the text in the original language to see if you can work out what is going on, what the grammatical forms are, how the whole fits together. Once you've got to grips with that sentence, or those few lines of verse, move on to the next small chunk, and so on.
- If there are words you don't know, consult a dictionary. Online aids such as the Perseus Greek and Latin Word Study tools can be helpful in offering both possible meanings and possible cases / moods / tenses etc. However, you should be **very careful** in your use of this kind of thing: firstly, the suggestions emerge from a statistically based algorithm and thus may not offer you the correct meaning in *this* particular instance; secondly, over-reliance on such tools will in the long term hamper rather than assist your learning of the languages. Your brain needs to get used to trying to puzzle things out and running through the possible options: memorising vocabulary, principal parts and so on may feel a slog, but in the end it will offer you a far quicker way to read texts than endlessly clicking on hyperlinks.
- You may want to create a text-specific vocabulary list. Looking back through and learning this will help you to speed up your reading as you go on: you will soon get to recognise words which crop up multiple times, and be able to make educated guesses about related words, compound verbs and so on. Again, though, remember that simply knowing what a word means in isolation is not the whole job done: you need to understand how in *this* context the word works, both in terms of grammar and syntax and – ideally, ultimately – in terms of tone and idiom. If you use an online vocabulary assistant like Quizlet, again make sure that this is only *part* of your approach to translating your texts, not the entirety.
- If, having read a published translation, looked up unfamiliar vocabulary, and having wrestled with a particular sentence or clause for some time you are still unsure how it fits together, don't worry. Simply make a note of it and, in due course, ask someone with more experience in the languages if they can help. Often you will find that if you've struggled to make sense of something you are not the first, and many published commentaries will also contain brief explanations of how certain phrases or constructions are working. If you have access to a relevant commentary before you come to Oxford you should make use of it; if not (again) just make a note of the troublesome part and return to it in due course.
- You may wish to write out by hand your own translation of your set texts as you go along. The act of writing things down is a great aid to memory and learning, and handwriting is probably better for these purposes than typing (and certainly better than cutting and pasting on a screen). At the very least, though, we recommend that you make notes which go further than simply recording the English meaning of individual words: include information you have gleaned on the constructions used, the reason for this being in the genitive, and so on. These will be of use to you when you return to re-read your texts.
- Finally, some reassurance: you will almost certainly find this way of reading your texts extremely slow when you start. This is completely normal. As you become more familiar with the languages in general and with individual authors' styles, your reading speed will increase exponentially. If you cut corners and let yourself off with a vague approximation rather than as precise an understanding as possible, you will only be postponing that inevitable need to look the text squarely in the face and get to grips with grammar!

A note on sourcing texts and translations:

If you are in a position to be able to buy some of your set texts, that can make life simpler. We are only too well aware, though, how expensive such books tend to be and recognise that most students will own only a few, if any.

Cheap second-hand copies of translations are often easy to find, whether in actual second hand bookshops or via online middlemen like Abebooks. Unfortunately, even used editions of texts in the original languages tend to be quite expensive – and if you do buy second hand, you need to ensure that you're getting the **right version** (and preferably not a copy already covered in someone else's notes). In some cases, it may be possible for you to borrow texts from a library, and once you have started your course at Oxford you will often be able to take out set editions on loan. At St Hilda's we have made a point of building up our store of set texts within the college library.

Texts and translations of classical works are available online, but if you decide to use these you should be aware that the texts are not always reliable, and the translations often offputtingly old-fashioned.

Once you are on course, there are multiple copies of almost all the set texts in the college library available to borrow. In their first term, all students can apply for a book grant to cover the costs of a few essentials. We also have other funds to which students in particular financial need will be able to apply at any stage of their course for support with buying books necessary for their studies.

Suggested translations for the Greek and Latin literature papers:

Homer, *Odyssey*

- Emily Wilson (W. W. Norton & Company, 2018 etc)
- Antony Verity (Oxford World's Classics, 2016)

Euripides, *Bacchae*

- James Morwood (*Bacchae and Other Plays*, Oxford World's Classics, 2008)
- Robin Robertson (Vintage, 2014)

Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*

- Alan Sommerstein (*Lysistrata and Other Plays*, Penguin, 2003)
- Stephen Halliwell (*Birds and Other Plays*, Oxford World's Classics, 1997, reissued 2008)

Catullus [NB with both of these, bear in mind that the text used sometimes diverges from your set text]

- Guy Lee (Oxford World's Classics, 1990 etc)
- G. P. Goold (Bristol Classics Press/Bloomsbury, 1989)

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

- A. D. Melville (Oxford World's Classics, 1986 etc)
- David Raeburn (Penguin, 2004)