

Magdalene College

Armstrong Arts and Humanities Essay Competition 2026
Essay Questions

1. **Critical theorist Andre Gorz calls for a ‘politics of time’, which reflects that autonomy over time is central to human freedom. Discuss the importance of self determination in time-use compared to other aspects of freedom.**

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: History and Modern Languages, History and Politics, Human, Social and Political Sciences, Law, Philosophy, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion

2. **“Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people come from and where they are going.” (Rita Mae Brown, born 1944). Discuss this quote with reference to studying languages.**

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, Classics, English, History, History and Modern Languages, Linguistics, Modern and Medieval Languages

3. **“... what we call ‘social knowledge’ and ‘natural knowledge’ are hybrid entities: what we know of comets, icebergs, and neutrinos irreducibly contains what we know of those people who speak for and about these things, just as what we know about the virtues of people is informed by their speech about things that exist in the world.” (Steven Shapin, 1994). Discuss in relation to the validity of science.**

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: Geography, History, History and Politics, History and Modern Languages, Human, Social and Political Sciences, Land Economy, Philosophy, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion

4. **“Translation is that which transforms everything so that nothing changes.” (Günter Grass, 1927 - 2015). Discuss the terms ‘transform’ and ‘change’ with reference to translation of literature – bearing in mind that this quote itself has been translated from German.**

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5. ***“I have never been in a battle. And I grow increasingly convinced that I have very little idea of what a battle can be like.”*** Discuss this quote by military historian John Keegan in relation to the problem of how a scholar can approach war.

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6. ***“The artist’s imagination at its most intense fires out what is perishable in fact; he builds with what is durable; but the biographer must accept the perishable, build with it, imbed it in the very fabric of his work. Much will perish; little will live. And thus we come to the conclusion that he [the biographer] is a craftsman, not an artist; and his work is not a work of art, but something betwixt and between.”*** — Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography.”

Respond to this quotation from Woolf. Is biography an art form like sculpture, or the novel? Alternatively, you might consider: does fiction actually “fire out what is perishable in fact” — are facts not durable material with which to build lasting art? What’s the relationship between fact and fiction?

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7. ***“If any one should importune me to give a reason why I loved him, I feel it could no otherwise be expressed than by making answer, ‘Because it was he; because it was I.’ There is beyond what I am able to say, I know not what inexplicable and inevitable power that brought on this union.”*** — Montaigne, “Of Friendship,” trans. by William Hazlitt

Consider the nature of a fictional friendship in a literary text written or published prior to 1900. Where does friendship come from? What makes a true friendship? You may want to consider the essay by Michel de Montaigne, from which this quote is drawn, in your answer.

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: English, History and Modern Languages, Linguistics, Modern and Medieval Languages, Philosophy, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion

8. The role of place and space has been consistently undervalued and under-theorised in the social sciences. Critically assess this contention.

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: Architecture, Geography, History, History and Modern Languages, Human, Social and Political Sciences, Land Economy, Law, Philosophy, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion

9. “The truth is rarely pure and never simple” (Oscar Wilde, 1854 - 1900). Explore this quote in relation to the value of studying and discussing texts from philosophy, literature, religion, or all three.

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10. “Philosophical thinking begins as soon as it ceases to content itself with cognitions that are predictable and from which nothing more emerges than what had been placed there beforehand. The humane significance of computers would be to unburden the thinking of living beings to the extent that thought would gain the freedom to attain a knowledge that is not already implicit.”—Theodor W. Adorno, “Notes on Philosophical Thinking” (1969)

To what extent will the proliferation of AI large language models such as ChatGPT help or hinder human learning and/or creativity? Link your answer to an interpretation of the quote above.

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11. “I would like to say that the home of belief lies in my relation to others.” – Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (1999)
Is religious belief a private or public matter? Answer with reference to the quotation above, but you may bring in theological, philosophical, political, historical, and/or legal perspectives.

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Politics, History and Modern Languages, Human, Social and Political Sciences, Law, Philosophy, Theology, Religion, and Philosophy of Religion

12. How did children's education differ in the past? Answer this question by retrieving and discussing at least 4 different manuscript sources from your local city/town/village/parish/school archives, or other local archives. Please append photographs of the relevant sections of these manuscripts to your essay submission.

If you like this question, you may wish to explore Cambridge undergraduate courses in: Education, English, History, History and Politics, History and Modern Languages, Human, Social and Political Sciences, Law, Linguistics, Modern and Medieval Languages, Music