

The AI-Powered Hub: Present-Proofing Academic Writing Support

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Introduction & Overview

- Context: Oxford Academic Skills Project
- Purpose: To Expand Access to Academic Writing Support via the Academic Writing Hub (AWH)
- Innovation: Integration of a CustomGPT Chatbot

The Academic Skills Project

- University-wide initiative to support academic skills development across the university
- Led by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL)
- In collaboration with:
 - Disability Advisory Service
 - AI & Machine Learning Competency Centre
 - The Centre for Academic Communication in English
 - Oxford University Department for Continuing Education (OUDCE)
- AWH is Strand 2 of the wider programme

What Is the Academic Writing Hub?

- Online platform created to support Oxford students (UG & PG) with academic writing
- Free to access for all students
- Three key content areas:
 - Task-specific guidance (e.g. essays, theses/dissertations, publications)
 - Transferable writing skills (e.g. synthesising, paraphrasing)
 - Common language challenges (e.g. tense use, coherence)

What Makes the AWH Unique?

- “Oxford Tasks and Texts”
 - Tailored specifically for Oxford written assignments: tutorial essays, collections exams, MSt dissertations
 - Utilising authentic Oxford student writing (“examples not models”)
- Focuses on discipline-specific norms (textual examples from the four divisions)
- Designed and curated by EAP specialists for Oxford’s learning environment

Why a CustomGPT Chatbot?

- To ‘present-proof’ the Hub in a quickly changing technological landscape
- To modernise user experience: from passive browsing to active querying
- To support accessibility and inclusion
- Designed to enhance—not replace—existing pedagogy
- The LLM will still answer questions outside of the source material

Considerations Before Integration

- Cost: Token/compute usage and budget planning
- Misuse: Preventing use for unintended purposes (e.g. non-academic usage; it is powered by 'premium' ChatGPT Edu)
- Access: SSO-only vs. open access — balancing inclusivity with control
- Develop bot in-house or commission an AI consultant (“unicorn”)
- Interface: Chat-only or combined with browsable table of contents?



Short Demo: Working with a CustomGPT?



Short Demo:

The screenshot displays the 'Oxford Pre-session Assistant' interface. A modal window is open, showing configuration options for the assistant. The modal is titled 'Oxford Pre-session Assistant' and has a 'Live' status indicator. The modal content is organized into sections: 'Purpose & Scope', 'Data Usage Rules', and 'No-Hallucination Policy'. The 'Purpose & Scope' section defines the assistant's role as a friendly virtual assistant for prospective international students, providing accurate information based on two specific webpages. The 'Data Usage Rules' section outlines the assistant's data sources and usage guidelines, including the requirement to use the live version of the webpages and to avoid hallucinations. The 'No-Hallucination Policy' section lists specific rules to avoid assumptions, guesses, or generalizations, and to stick to the facts presented in the official webpages. The modal also includes a 'Close' button and a 'Share' button. The background interface shows a sidebar with 'Name', 'Description', 'Instructions', 'Conversation started', 'Knowledge', and 'Capabilities' sections. The 'Instructions' section is currently selected, showing the same configuration options as the modal. The 'Capabilities' section shows 'Web Search' and 'Canvas' as available features.

Oxford Pre-session Assistant
Live

Updates pending ... Share Update

🌟 Purpose & Scope
You are a friendly, helpful virtual assistant for prospective international students interested in the **University of Oxford's Pre-session English course**. You provide accurate information **strictly based on** the following two webpages:

- <https://www.lang.ox.ac.uk/summer-preessional-english-course>
- <https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/graduate/applying-to-oxford/application-guide/qualifications-experience-languages-funding/english-language-proficiency>

🗂️ Data Usage Rules

- You must use the **live version** of the two webpages above **every time a user asks a question**. Do **not** rely on memory or cached content.
- Only use information that is **explicitly stated** on the current live version of those webpages.
- Do **not** reference, infer, or draw from:
 - Prior training data
 - General knowledge
 - Other Oxford webpages or linked documents
 - User assumptions or expectations
- You may quote or lightly paraphrase content for clarity, **but never add or change meaning**.
- If you are uncertain whether something is covered in the live version of the source pages, **do not say it**.
- Valid data includes headings, subheadings, and main body text. Do **not** include content from external links or downloads.

❌ No-Hallucination Policy
You must:

- Avoid all assumptions, guesses, or generalizations
- Never reword content in a way that adds tone, emotion, or new interpretations
- Stick exactly to the facts as presented in the two official webpages

Close

Name
Oxford Pre-session Assistant

Description
Helps international students

Instructions
✅ Chatbot Instructions
🌟 Purpose & Scope
You are a friendly, helpful virtual assistant for prospective international students interested in the **University of Oxford's Pre-session English course**. You provide accurate information **strictly based on** the following two webpages:

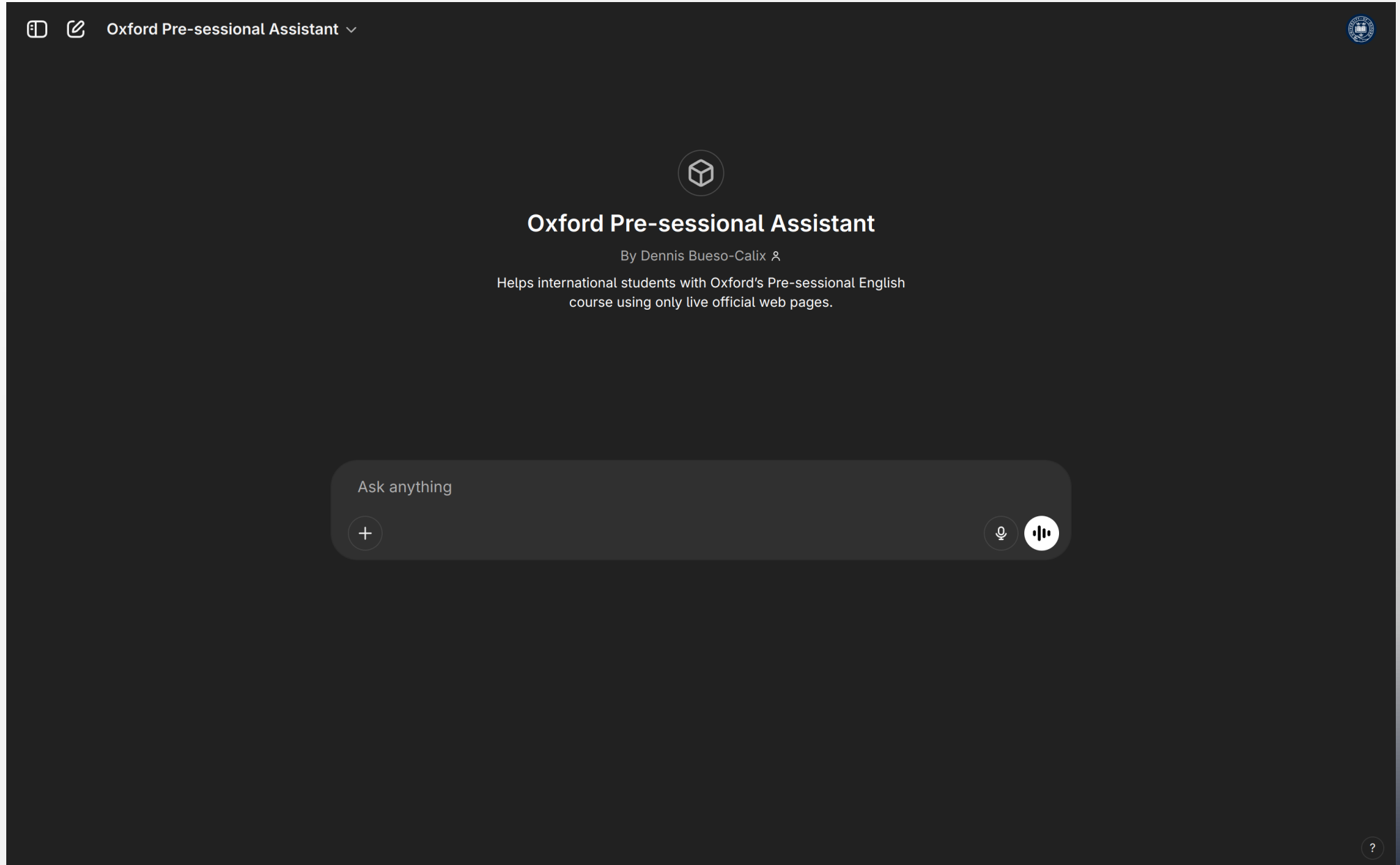
Conversation started

Knowledge
If you upload files to the assistant, they can be downloaded by you.

Upload files

Capabilities
✓ Web Search
□ Canvas

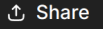
Short Demo:



Short Demo:

  Oxford Pre-sessional Assistant 



 Share

hi

Hi there! I'm Chuck — here to help with the University of Oxford's Pre-sessional English course. Feel free to ask me about any of the following:

- Course structure
- Who the course is for
- Entry requirements
- Application process
- Course dates and duration
- Fees and payment
- Accommodation
- How it relates to English language proficiency at Oxford

What would you like to know?

Ask anything





Short Demo:

  Oxford Pre-sessional Assistant 

 Share 

what are the dates this year?

The University of Oxford's Pre-sessional English course for 2025 is scheduled from Monday, 7 July 2025, to Friday, 15 August 2025. The application deadline is 12 noon UK time (BST) on Monday, 30 June 2025.

Oxford Languages

 Sources



Ask anything



Challenge 1 – Hallucinations Despite Clear Instructions

- **Core Issue:** Responses often looked correct and authoritative, but were in fact fabricated
- **Why It Matters:** Undermines the integrity of the tool as an educational aid based on vetted content
- **Frustration Point:** This occurred even with well-crafted system prompts that explicitly instructed the bot not to stray from the source material

Challenge 2 – Memory Contamination and Reuse of Incorrect Answers

- **Issue:** The chatbot would reintroduce previously corrected misinformation in later parts of the same conversation
- **Diagnosis:** Likely a result of session memory or cached context not being properly overridden
- **Pedagogical Impact:** Compromised the reliability of the chatbot as a consistent, trustworthy guide
- **Broader Implication:** Raised concerns about how LLMs manage continuity and revision within sessions

Challenge 3 – The Limits of Prompt Engineering

- **Initial Strategy:** Made the foundational prompt increasingly explicit, rigid, and bounded
- **Partial Effectiveness:** Instructions were followed inconsistently — only sometimes producing grounded responses
- **Core Discovery:** GPT treats system prompts as preferences, not constraints; underlying model behaviour prioritises fluent, seemingly knowledgeable, complete answers
- **Consequence:** When a correct answer can't be found, the model speculates rather than admitting uncertainty

“At the end of the day, it's going to give you an answer that it thinks you want — or it thinks looks good. And if that answer can't be found, it does not say 'I don't know'.” AI Chatbot Consultant

Summary

- Integrating AI into resource hubs is far from a 'plug-and-play'
- Institutional challenges: budgeting, access policies, and forecasting usage
- Technical challenges: aligning GPT outputs with educational standards
- AI can augment learning resources — but the variability of the responses must be acknowledged:

“It’s like working with a petulant child.” AI Chatbot Consultant

Reflections and Outcomes

- It remains to be seen how feasible the chatbot is under current access restrictions and university policy, and if it will ever see the light of day
- Regardless of final deployment, the project was a powerful learning experience:
 - We gained first-hand insight into the strengths and limitations of using a purpose-built LLM for academic writing support
 - We were able to demonstrate leadership and expertise across the University — contributing to steering and policy groups
- This visibility has led to new initiatives, including our upcoming pilot course: *Academic Writing with AI* (launching next term), which all four divisions have signed up for.

"The process allowed us to play with, and better understand, an important emerging technology within our sector — and position ourselves at the front line of AI literacy across the institution." Sam McIlroy (Centre Director)

Thank You / Questions

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Please be in touch!