
Getting Ready for Post A-level Russian at Robinson

In your first year as a 'post-A-Level' (aka Option B) student of Russian, you will be developing and fine-tuning your skills in the use of Russian through classes, lectures, and a weekly conversation session. And you will be travelling your own pathway through the Slavonic Section's challenging interdisciplinary introduction to Russian and East European cultural history, [SL1: Introduction to Russian Culture](#). Prepare yourself: a dogged-eared copy of Lermontov's *Geroi nashego vremeni* [*A Hero of Our Time*, 1839-41] will be almost always at your side!

Think of your summer prep as two related projects:

1) To hit the ground running come October, be sure to take time over the summer to work actively on your **Russian language skills**. Under normal circumstances, you might choose to take a summer language course or spend time living or working in a Russian-speaking country. But in this pandemic, simply try instead to watch Russian television via YouTube, listen to Russian radio and podcasts, and read Russian news websites and newspapers – ideally every day for at least 30 minutes. You should also review Russian grammar, especially if you have taken a gap year since your Russian A-levels and have not worked much with Russian in that time. Keep in mind that your goal is to enlarge your vocabulary, improve your listening skills, and increase the grammatical accuracy and syntactic complexity of both your written and spoken Russian.

Please note that you will be asked to take a **diagnostic test prior to coming to Cambridge**. (Information will be sent out by the Slavonic Section in late August.) The aim of this exercise is to assess your level of Russian and allocate you to the right group. Check out this list of [Basic Russian Grammar Topics](#) (for post-A-Level and ex ab-initio students), which helps form the basis for the diagnostic test.

For grammar revision, use James S. Levine, *Schaum's Outline of Russian Grammar* (McGraw-Hill Education) or Terence Wade, *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar* (Blackwell).

2) **To prepare yourself for [SL1: Introduction to Russian culture](#)**, please read the following before the start of the Michaelmas term:

- A. An overview of Russian history from the ninth to at least the nineteenth centuries (and preferably into the twentieth century). Two good, basic (short) introductions are:
 - Geoffrey Hosking, *Russian History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2012)
 - Stephen Lovell, *The Soviet Union: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008)
- B. Some background on Russian literature:

- Caryl Emerson, *The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature* (Cambridge, 2008). This book may be a bit overwhelming before you have begun the course, but you would do well to look at Chapters 3 and 4 before you arrive, as they provide useful background for the material you will be tackling in the first term.
- C. **ALL** of Mikhail Lermontov, *Geroi nashego vremeni* [*A Hero of Our Time*] IN RUSSIAN. Please use the Bristol Classical Press edition, or a similar edition that is accented, glossed and annotated.
- D. **As many as possible** of the following (in English):
- Alexander Pushkin, *Mednyi vsadnik* [*The Bronze Horseman*, Bristol Classical Press edition recommended]
 - Ivan Turgenev, *Svidanie* [*The Encounter*] and *Kas'ian s krasivoi mechi* [*Kas'ian from the Beautiful Lands*] from *Zapiski okhotnika / A Huntsman's Sketches*
 - Nikolai Gogol, *Shinel'* [*The Overcoat*, Bristol Classical Press edition recommended]
 - Anna Akhmatova, *Rekviem* (*Requiem*)

All of the texts may be found in their entirety online. A quick Google search should lead you to the relevant links.

E. You could also read:

- Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, eds., *National Identity in Russian Culture* (Cambridge, 2004): Introduction, and selected chapters (chosen according to your interest, but with particular focus on those by Hubertus Jahn, Simon Franklin).
- Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (2006): although this book is dense, it is an excellent history of East Slavic lands and an important reminder that the landmass that we may think of as 'Russia', the 'Russian Empire', and the 'Soviet Union' is complex and contested.

More of this information can be found on the [website of the Slavonic Studies Section](#). Please feel free to contact [Dr Rory Finnin](#), Robinson's Director of Studies for Russian, with any questions.

F. In Paper SL1, you will be asked to write commentaries on literary passages, so it is very useful for us to have an idea of your current skills in practical literary criticism. **Please write a critical commentary on the passage below from Ivan Turgenev's *Отцы и дети* (1862), which briefly alludes to life in summer during an epidemic.** You will find some useful guidelines on writing commentaries further below. You might find it helpful to read some general criticism on the novel to inform your thinking; some suggested reading is listed immediately below the passage. Aim to write between 600 and 1000 words. This work should be handed in to the Porters' Lodge marked for the attention of Dr Rory Finnin as soon as you arrive at Robinson in October.

Наступили лучшие дни в году — первые дни июня. Погода стояла прекрасная; правда, издали грозилась опять холера, но жители ...й губернии успели уже

привыкнуть к ее посещениям. Базаров вставал очень рано и отправлялся версты за две, за три, не гулять — он прогулок без дела терпеть не мог, — а собирать травы, насекомых. Иногда он брал с собой Аркадия. На возвратном пути у них обыкновенно завязывался спор, и Аркадий обыкновенно оставался побежденным, хотя говорил больше своего товарища.

Однажды они как-то долго замешкались; Николай Петрович вышел к ним навстречу в сад и, поравнявшись с беседкой, вдруг услышал быстрые шаги и голоса обоих молодых людей. Они шли по ту сторону беседки и не могли его видеть.

— Ты отца недостаточно знаешь, — говорил Аркадий.

Николай Петрович притаился.

— Твой отец добрый малый, — промолвил Базаров, — но он человек отставной, его песенка спета.

Николай Петрович приник ухом... Аркадий ничего не отвечал.

«Отставной человек» постоял минуты две неподвижно и медленно поплелся домой.

— Третьего дня, я смотрю, он Пушкина читает, — продолжал между тем Базаров. — Растолкуй ему, пожалуйста, что это никуда не годится. Ведь он не мальчик: пора бросить эту ерунду. И охота же быть романтиком в нынешнее время! Дай ему что-нибудь дельное почитать.

— Что бы ему дать? — спросил Аркадий.

— Да, я думаю, Бюхнерово «Stoff und Kraft» 1 на первый случай.

— Я сам так думаю, — заметил одобрительно Аркадий. — «Stoff und Kraft» написано популярным языком...

— Вот как мы с тобой, — говорил в тот же день после обеда Николай Петрович своему брату, сидя у него в кабинете, — в отставные люди попали, песенка наша спета. Что ж? Может быть, Базаров и прав; но мне, признаюсь, одно больно: я надеялся именно теперь тесно и дружески сойтись с Аркадием, а выходит, что я остался назади, он ушел вперед, и понять мы друг друга не можем.

— Да почему он ушел вперед? И чем он от нас так уж очень отличается? — с нетерпением воскликнул Павел Петрович. — Это все ему в голову синьор этот вбил, нигилист этот. Ненавижу я этого лекаришку; по-моему, он просто шарлатан; я уверен, что со всеми своими лягушками он и в физике недалеко ушел. — Нет, брат, ты этого не говори: Базаров умен и знающ.

Suggested supplementary reading:

Harold Bloom, ed., *Ivan Turgenev* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), pp. 159-188.

Jane Costlow, *Worlds within Worlds: The Novels of Ivan Turgenev* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 105-137.

F.F. Seeley, *Turgenev: A Reading of His Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 215-234.

Guidelines for commentary writing:

The following advice is taken from Paper SL1 materials distributed at the start of the academic year.

There is no set recipe for doing commentaries. The elements that make up a successful commentary tend to vary and will depend on the nature of the text and on particular approaches to it. That said, here are few guideposts:

1. A commentary is not a mere summary of the passage, nor is it an essay that would ideally address an entire work or authorial oeuvre, for example. *With a commentary, you are engaged in a focused close reading of a passage.* Of course, to elucidate the passage, it may be appropriate to refer to its context, but this does not mean writing an essay on the text or period.

2. It is best not to proceed line-by-line through a passage from beginning to end. Instead, you might identify important themes or elements and then discuss each of those in turn, offering illustrations with examples from the passage.

3. A commentary pays particularly close attention to the use of language. Depending on the text, this might include (but need not be limited to) some or all of the following:

- use of rhyme, metre, and alliteration;
- lexical [vocabulary] choices;
- syntax [the arrangement of words within a sentence or paragraph], especially when manipulated to highlight meaning, to create ambiguity, or to interact with poetic verse form;
- grammatical features such as sequences of verb tenses or aspect, which might be used to create a particular temporal structure.

4. *There is no point in simply describing such features if you do not also explain how or why they are important or meaningful.* It adds little or nothing to an understanding of a passage if the commentary, say, merely identifies verb tense, states that alliteration takes place, and lets it go at that.

5. It is important to pay attention to the means of representation and to address not only the question of what is said, *but also the question of how it is said.* A good commentary may well consider the assumptions that are implicitly or explicitly made by the text or attributed to the reader and the ways in which configurations of imagery and thematic developments are set up and manipulated.

6. There is no need to ascribe to the passage a definitive meaning or structure. It is fine to problematise it. Good commentaries will often point out ambiguities or inconsistencies and suggest possible alternative readings. Ideally, the different points raised by a passage for commentary should be synthesised into a coherent argument.

To sum up, your commentary should try to:

- explain *how form and content interact within the passage*, rather than considering them in isolation;
- analyse how rhetorical and stylistic features (such as imagery, narrative voice, metaphors, syntax, and tenses etc.) help to *convey different meanings*;
- investigate *what type of emotional or cognitive responses the passage may invite in the act of reading*.