Gates Cambridge Scholarship: The Complete Application Guide

Everything on the Programme and Apply pages of gatescambridge.org, turned into strategy: what Gates is buying, the rounds, the golden thread, the research proposal, the reference and the interview.

~70	4	4	£23,152
FULL-COST AWARDS A YEAR	SELECTION CRITERIA	ANSWERS: 200 / 200 / 300 / 300 WORDS	MAINTENANCE, 2026-27

Gates Cambridge funds about 70 postgraduate students a year, and four short answers on the funding form are the only place you are asked to prove you fit. This guide takes apart every page in the Programme and Apply sections of gatescambridge.org and turns it into strategy, with worked examples for each answer, the reference, the research proposal and the interview.

Read this first

How to use it

This is Guide 1 of 6, built like The Application Lab's Chevening series: a general guide, one guide per answer, and a Q&A. Use the guide bar at the top of the page.

GUIDE	TITLE	WHAT IT COVERS
1	General Guide (this guide)	What Gates is buying, eligibility, timeline, the funnel, the golden thread, research proposal, reference, interview, funding, mistakes
2	Question 1: Academic Excellence	About 200 words, with three worked examples
3	Question 2: Course Choice	About 200 words, with three worked examples

GUIDE	TITLE	WHAT IT COVERS
4	Question 3: Improving the Lives of Others	About 300 words, with three worked examples
5	Question 4: Leadership	About 300 words, with three worked examples
6	Q&A for Applicants	48 questions, a final checklist and eight mistakes

1. Read sections 2 to 5 of this guide once, in order.
2. Build your thread on one page (section 6) before you draft a word.
3. Draft the four answers with guides 2 to 5.
4. Brief your referee (section 8) and prepare for interview (section 9) in parallel with drafting, not afterwards.
5. Use guide 6 to check any fact, then the final checklist (section 12) before you submit.

About the examples

Every example in this guide is invented. The people, universities, supervisors, organisations, schemes and numbers are fictional and exist only to demonstrate technique. In your own application every name and figure must be real, accurate and something you can talk about for two minutes without notes. Do not lift the structures sentence by sentence: the panel reads hundreds of answers and a borrowed shape is easy to spot.

Write it yourself

The Gates Cambridge pages do not state an AI policy, so check the current form and the University's application guidance before you rely on any tool. Whatever the rules, write every answer in your own words. The interview is built to test whether the person on screen is the person in the answers, and a polished paragraph you cannot defend will cost you more than a plain one you can.

What this guide is based on

The nine pages under Programme (The scholarship, The experience, The University) and Apply (Eligibility, Criteria, Timeline, How to apply, How we select, Frequently Asked Questions), read on 21 October 2026. Dates and funding figures change each cycle, so confirm them on the live

pages before you act. The wider strategy is my reading of those pages, not an official statement from the Trust.

Snapshot

ITEM	WHAT THE SITE SAYS
Awards	About 70 full-cost scholarships a year, roughly two-thirds to PhD students and about a third in the US round
Who funds it	Gates Cambridge Trust, set up in October 2000 with a US$210m gift from the Gates Foundation
Community	About 250 Scholars in Cambridge at any time; 1,700+ alumni from 116 countries
Selection basis	Needs-blind: academic qualifications, commitment and potential only
Written assessment	Four short answers (200, 200, 300, 300 words), a Gates reference, a research proposal for PhD applicants
Interview	25 to 30 minutes, only for applicants nominated by their department
Feedback	None given to unsuccessful applicants
Right now	The US round closed on 14 October 2026. The main round closes on 8 December 2026 or 6 January 2027, depending on your course

02 SECTION 2

What Gates Cambridge is actually buying

Gates is not funding the best transcript. It is funding people it expects to improve other people's lives and to lead others in doing it. The site describes the programme as being for outstanding postgraduate students with "a potential for social leadership" and a desire to improve the lives of others. Academic strength gets you nominated. The other three criteria decide who is selected.

The Trust frames the scholarship as an investment in a global network: its mission is to build a network of future leaders committed to improving the lives of others. Read every criterion

through one question: if we fund this person, who is better off in ten years because of them, and what did Cambridge add?

The four criteria, decoded

CRITERION	WHAT THE PAGE ASKS FOR	THE QUESTION BEHIND IT
Academic excellence	Evidence from transcripts, references, experience and potential to succeed on the course. Departments nominate only their most outstanding applicants	Will this person thrive at Cambridge?
Reasons for choice of course	A strong case for one specific degree. PhD and most research MPhil applicants contact a supervisor and summarise a research project. Taught MPhil applicants show how the course serves their career plans	Is this the course that transforms your work, and can you do it?
Commitment to improving the lives of others	Read broadly, and defined by the applicant through evidence of past, current and future commitment to the societies they will live and work in	What have you already done for others, and what will you keep doing?
Capacity for leadership	Many forms count. Evidence of leadership so far, plus how those skills will have impact in a future career	Do things change, and do people follow, when you are involved?

Which part of the application tests which criterion

CRITERION	FUNDING FORM ANSWER	GATES REFERENCE	INTERVIEW
Academic excellence	Question 1 (about 200 words)	"Intellectual ability"	Your academic work and why the subject matters
Choice of course	Question 2 (about 200 words)	"Justification for the choice of course"	A convincing case for this course at Cambridge and how it links to your career
Improving lives of others	Question 3 (about 300 words)	Commitment to improving the lives of others	Your motivation, and the responsibilities of a full-cost scholarship

CRITERION	FUNDING FORM ANSWER	GATES REFERENCE	INTERVIEW
Leadership	Question 4 (about 300 words)	Leadership capacity	Why you could be a Gates Cambridge Scholar

The consequence is simple: every criterion is tested three times, by you, by a referee and by a panel. They must agree. A leadership story in Question 4 that your referee never mentions is a warning sign to the reader.

The CLICC values

The Trust published five core values in 2026, developed in 2025 after consulting Scholars and staff. They form the acronym CLICC. They describe the community you are joining, not a scoring sheet, so show them through what you have done rather than naming them.

VALUE	THE TRUST'S MEANING	HOW IT SHOWS UP IN STRONG EVIDENCE
Compassion	A community that cares deeply for others and supports each other	You stayed with a problem or a person when it cost you something
Learning	Curiosity in all areas and learning from others	You changed your mind or your method because of someone else's knowledge
Internationality	A global network that values different countries and cultures	You worked across a border, language or culture and learned from it
Community	An inclusive community with a strong sense of belonging	You built or held a group together, especially including people who were left out
Change	Improving the lives of others and driving positive social change	Something is measurably different because of you

Change restates the third criterion. The other four describe the culture the Trust values: caring, curious, outward-looking and inclusive.

Five things the site tells you that most applicants miss

1. **Needs-blind means need is not evidence.** Financial circumstances are not considered, so do not spend your 200 words explaining hardship. If your background shaped your commitment, use it as the reason you act, not as a plea.
2. **You define "improving the lives of others."** The Trust says it reads this broadly and lets applicants define it. Say in one clause what it means for you, then prove it.
3. **The future counts as evidence.** The criterion asks for past, current and future commitment. A credible plan is part of the answer, not an afterthought.
4. **The scholarship is treated as a responsibility.** The interview asks about the "opportunities and responsibilities" of a prestigious full-cost scholarship. Have a view.
5. **Community is an expectation.** Scholars get orientation, a welcome dinner, a Learning for Purpose professional development programme, an annual lecture, a gala, symposia, a Scholars' Room, a Scholars' Council and an alumni platform called Gates Connect. A Scholar who only studies is not what the programme is describing.

03 SECTION 3

Eligibility and the traps

You can apply if you hold citizenship of any country outside the UK and apply to a PhD, an MLitt or a one-year full-time postgraduate course at Cambridge. The FAQ adds that dual citizens of the UK and another country are eligible. Most avoidable rejections here come from the wrong course type or the wrong round, not from the profile.

Which courses count

ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
PhD, full-time or part-time (part-time funding is still a pilot)	Any undergraduate degree, including a second BA
MLitt, full-time	MASt, MSt, PGCert, PGDip
MPhil, MRes, LLM, full-time	Any part-time degree other than the PhD
Other one-year full-time postgraduate courses, with exceptions	MBA, EMBA, Global EMBA, MFin, Executive Master of Accounting, Business Doctorate

ELIGIBLE	NOT ELIGIBLE
	Doctor of Education, PGCE, MBBChir Clinical Studies, MD, Graduate Course in Medicine (A101), Master of Conservation of Easel Painting

The Eligibility page and the FAQ list slightly different exclusions, so treat both lists as binding and confirm your course in the University Course Directory before you spend a week on the application.

Questions applicants ask, answered from the site

QUESTION	ANSWER
Can current Cambridge students apply?	Yes, for a new course, for example an MPhil student applying for a PhD. They are considered in the second, international round. You cannot apply to fund the rest of a course you have already started. Current Gates Scholars can apply for a second scholarship for a new degree
Can I apply for a second master's?	Yes, with a strong justification. Check with the department that the course suits you and that you meet their admission criteria
Is there a minimum GPA?	No. Academic excellence is judged across the whole application and the references
Do I need an English test for Gates?	Gates has no requirement. The University does
Does Gates pay the application fee?	No. Ask the Postgraduate Admissions Office about fee waivers
Can I hold another scholarship?	Yes, but you cannot receive duplicate funds such as two maintenance payments. The Trust will agree a shared arrangement with you
Do I need a confirmed supervisor before applying?	Gates does not require one. The Criteria page still expects PhD and most research MPhil applicants to have contacted a potential supervisor, so do it
How many applications can I make?	As many as you make eligible course applications, with a cap that was 7 in 2025/6. A withdrawn application still counts. Each course needs its own Gates funding section

QUESTION	ANSWER
Can I edit after submitting?	No
Can I reapply after a rejection?	Yes. A previous unsuccessful application does not count against you

Strategy: choose the course with the selection odds in mind

About two-thirds of awards go to PhD students. The site gives no success rates, so I cannot tell you the odds, but the split means a PhD applicant with a clear project and supervisor competes for the larger share of awards. That is a reason to ask whether a PhD fits your plans, not a reason to apply for one you cannot justify. Question 2 will expose a PhD chosen for the funding.

If you are applying to several courses, make each application a real case. The panel interviews you once, for one course, so a nomination for two will force you to choose.

The six eligibility traps

1. **The wrong round.** US citizens living in the US must apply in the October round. US citizens living or working abroad apply in the later round. Everyone else uses the later round.
2. **An ineligible degree.** MASt, MSt, PGDip and MBA are the common ones.
3. **A part-time master's.** Only the PhD can be part-time.
4. **A course already under way.** You cannot fund the remainder of it.
5. **The wrong deadline.** The funding deadline is the Course Funding Deadline in the Course Directory, not a date you assume.
6. **Treating a late submission as fixable.** Every document, including references, must be in by 11:59pm UK time on the date, and you cannot edit after submitting.

04 SECTION 4

Timeline: which round are you in?

Applications for 2027/28 entry opened on 11 September 2026, and most applicants have until 8 December 2026 or 6 January 2027 to submit. From 21 October that is 48 or 77 days.

There are two rounds, and the round is set by your citizenship and where you live, not by choice.

STAGE	US CITIZENS RESIDENT IN THE USA	ALL OTHER ELIGIBLE APPLICANTS
Applications open	11 September 2026	11 September 2026
Application deadline, 11:59pm UK time, references included	Wednesday 14 October 2026 (closed)	Tuesday 8 December 2026 or Wednesday 6 January 2027, set by your course in the Course Directory
Departmental ranking	Late October to November 2026	December to February
Outcome notified by, 11:59pm UK time	Monday 14 December 2026	Monday 8 March 2027
Selection panels	Friday 22 and Saturday 23 January 2027	Monday 22 and Tuesday 23 March 2027
Scholarships offered	By early February 2027	By early April 2027
Acceptance	Within 72 hours of the offer	Within 72 hours of the offer

How to read the dates

- **The "outcome" date is your interview invitation date.** The FAQ says that is when applicants learn whether they are invited to interview. Panels then sit about six weeks later in the US round and about two weeks later in the main round.
- **The main round leaves two weeks between invitation and interview.** Do not wait for the email to start preparing. Start the interview preparation in section 9 as soon as you submit.
- **Admission and funding are reviewed separately.** You may get a course offer before you hear about funding. An admission offer does not mean you were nominated.
- **You have 72 hours to accept.** Decide in advance how you would weigh any other offer, so you are not deciding under pressure.
- **There is no feedback.** Gates cannot give feedback to unsuccessful applicants, including interviewed ones, and cannot issue recognition letters. Plan your own debrief if it goes the

other way.

If you are a US citizen

US citizens resident in the United States must apply in October and are not eligible for the later round. The October 2026 deadline has passed, so if you missed it you would wait for the next cycle. US citizens who are studying or working overseas at the time of application use the later round.

If you are not sure which round applies

The Timeline page tells you to email info@gatescambridge.org with your details. All application questions go to that address first. The FAQ also says information webinars were due to start in summer 2026, so check the site and the Trust's social channels for sessions.

Working backwards from 8 December

If your Course Funding Deadline is 8 December, treat these as your real deadlines:

BY	WHAT SHOULD BE DONE
30 October	Course, supervisor contact (if PhD) and referee list settled; your four-answer thread written on one page
13 November	First full draft of all four answers; referees briefed using the template in section 8
27 November	Final drafts read by two outsiders; research proposal finished (PhD)
1 December	Application submitted, a week early. Chase referees now
8 December, 11:59pm UK	Hard deadline for the application and every reference

05 SECTION 5

How the application works

You submit one combined application for admission and funding through the University's Graduate Application Portal, and Gates reads all of it. There are two filters: your academic

department nominates a small number of applicants, then Gates interviews every nominee. The four short Gates answers are used to separate candidates who are already nominated.

The funnel

1. **Combined application.** You complete the admission section (course and College place) and the Gates Cambridge part of the funding section.
2. **Departmental ranking.** Each department nominates a small number of eligible applicants who meet all four criteria to a very high level. Admission is reviewed separately, so you may get an admission decision first.
3. **Nomination.** A relatively small share of applicants is nominated and invited to interview.
4. **Interview.** 25 to 30 minutes, in person or online, in front of one of four subject panels: Arts, Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences or Social Sciences.
5. **Selection and offer.** Panels select after interview. Offers go out by early February (US round) or early April (main round). You have 72 hours to accept.

What each part is for

PART OF THE APPLICATION	WHAT THE SITE SAYS IT DOES	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
Admission section and documents	Shows your academic background, plans and suitability for the course	This is the first gate. A weak admission case means no nomination, whatever your Gates answers say
Two academic references	Support admission	Academic excellence is judged here, so brief these referees on your strongest work
Four Gates selection questions	Distinguish between nominated candidates, and the only place you are asked about fit	Write them for a reader who already believes you are academically strong and is now comparing you with other strong people
Research proposal (PhD only)	Required if the course application does not already have one	Treat it as evidence for Criterion 2 as much as for admission
Gates Cambridge reference	Rates you against the four criteria and ranks you against a named group	A comparative judgement from someone credible is worth more than praise

PART OF THE APPLICATION	WHAT THE SITE SAYS IT DOES	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU
Interview	Tests all four criteria in 25 to 30 minutes	The answers and the reference set the questions you will get

Four things that follow

1. **Win the department first.** The site does not say whether departments read your four Gates answers when they rank applicants. Assume they may, and that they certainly read your admission documents. Invest in the admission personal statement, transcripts and academic referees as much as in the Gates answers.
2. **Write for comparison.** The Gates answers exist to separate people who are already good. Specific evidence of improving others' lives and of leadership will separate you, general ambition will not.
3. **Expect the three sources to be read together.** Gates has access to your full application. Your admission statement, the four answers and the reference should tell one story from different angles. Do not copy sentences between them.
4. **Remember that the panel is academic and mixed.** Each panel has experienced academics and practitioners and may include alumni and a Trust representative. Write for an intelligent reader outside your sub-field.

06 SECTION 6

The golden thread: build it before you draft

The four answers are four views of one person, so decide the person before you write any of them. Gates readers see your admission statement, your four answers and your reference side by side. If they contradict each other, or tell four unconnected stories, you look like someone assembling a profile rather than someone with a direction.

The simplest way to keep one voice is to give each answer a different job:

ANSWER	ITS JOB IN THE THREAD	THE READER SHOULD FINISH THINKING
Q1 Academic excellence	Proves the mind	This person can do hard intellectual work and will not struggle at Cambridge
Q2 Why this course	Proves the direction	This course is the next necessary step, and they have done the homework
Q3 Improving the lives of others	Proves the purpose	They already act for others, they know why, and they will keep doing it
Q4 Leadership	Proves the method	Things change when they are involved, and others follow

Fill this in on one page first

THREAD QUESTION	YOUR ANSWER
The problem I work on, in one specific sentence	
What "improving the lives of others" means for me, in one clause	
My strongest academic evidence, with one exact figure or named output	
The course and the one gap it closes	
The department, supervisor or research group, and the specific thing there I need	
What I have already changed for others (past)	
What I am doing for others now (current)	
What I will do after Cambridge, with a year (future)	
The leadership act: what I started, or who I brought together	
What I will add to the Gates community, one concrete thing	
What each of my three referees will say, and about which criterion	

The rules of the thread

1. **One story per answer, two at most.** Q3 and Q4 may draw on the same project only if each tells a different part: Q3 tells who benefited and why it matters to you, Q4 tells what you initiated and how you moved other people.
2. **Past, present, future in Q3 and Q4.** The criteria ask for all three. Q2, Q3 and Q4 each explicitly ask how the experience connects to your future plans, so the plan must be the same plan in all three.
3. **Recurring names, not recurring sentences.** The same organisation, mentor or community can appear in several answers. The same sentence cannot.
4. **The reference must be able to confirm it.** Every claim you most want believed should be something your Gates referee can speak to from first-hand knowledge.
5. **Question 1 does not ask about the future, but your thread should reach it.** One closing clause that points toward the course is enough.

Worked thread (invented)

This is the one-page thread for Wanjiru Kamau, an invented Kenyan applicant for a PhD in Plant Sciences. Every name and number is fictional.

THREAD QUESTION	WANJIRU'S ANSWER
The problem	Cassava brown streak virus destroys up to half of a smallholder's root harvest before it is seen, and the only reliable test costs more than a farmer earns from the crop
What improving lives means	Food security for households that currently lose their staple to a disease nobody can afford to diagnose
Academic evidence	First-class degree, top of 212 students in plant pathology; undergraduate thesis became a conference paper on a field-ready assay, with 94 per cent agreement with laboratory PCR on 380 samples
The course and the gap	PhD in Plant Sciences. I can build a test; I cannot yet design it to survive field conditions at scale, or explain virus evolution well enough to predict which strains will beat it
Department and supervisor	Professor Imogen Hartley-Boyce's plant virology group, whose recent work on virus resistance genes I need to understand to design the next generation of the test

THREAD QUESTION	WANJIRU'S ANSWER
Past	Founded the Siaya Cassava Testing Project: 1,420 farmers tested across 31 villages in three seasons
Current	Training 12 extension officers at the Lake Region Agricultural Research Institute to run the test without me
Future	By 2032, a district-level testing service run by the Institute and farmer cooperatives, funded by the county, covering 40,000 households
Leadership act	Persuaded three rival cooperatives to pool seed samples for one shared testing day, which became the project's model
Gates community contribution	Run the plant-health surgery I wish had existed for students from agricultural universities across the continent
Referees	Academic 1 (thesis supervisor): assay and academic strength. Academic 2 (department head): ranking against her cohort. Gates referee (Institute director): improving lives and leadership, first-hand

Notice what the thread does for each answer. Q1 uses the assay, Q2 uses the gap and the supervisor, Q3 uses the 1,420 farmers and the reason she cares, and Q4 uses the three cooperatives. The same life, four different angles, no repeated story.

07 SECTION 7

The PhD research proposal and your supervisor

For a PhD, the research proposal is the most detailed evidence you give Gates of why this course and why you, so write it as the proof behind Question 2. Gates requires PhD applicants to submit one. Most upload it as a compulsory admission document, and where the course application does not ask for one, it becomes a requirement of the Gates application. Applicants for other degrees do not need one.

What the proposal does for you

CRITERION	HOW THE PROPOSAL SUPPORTS IT
Academic excellence	Shows that you can frame a question, know the literature and design a method

CRITERION	HOW THE PROPOSAL SUPPORTS IT
Choice of course	Proves that the project is real, feasible and belongs in this department
Improving lives	Shows who could benefit from the answer, if the work has human stakes
Leadership	Shows a researcher who sets direction, not one who waits to be assigned

Expect the interview panel and your referee to probe it. You must be able to defend every claim for 10 minutes.

The supervisor question

The Criteria page expects PhD and most research MPhil applicants to contact a potential supervisor and to develop a research summary with them. The FAQ says Gates does not require a confirmed supervisor at submission, but advises that you research the department to make sure it can support your interests. Read those two together: **make contact, and make it useful, even if you cannot get a firm commitment before the deadline.**

Contacting a supervisor: a working method

1. **Shortlist two or three.** Read at least two recent papers by each. Know what they found.
2. **Write once, in about 150 words.** A specific subject line, one sentence on your work, one sentence on the connection to theirs, one question.
3. **Attach a one-page summary and a short CV.** Nothing longer.
4. **Ask a question that can be answered.** "Are you taking new students for 2027, and does this project fit?"
5. **Follow up once after ten days.** Then move on.
6. **Treat a redirect as a gift.** "You should talk to Dr Y" is a route into the right group.

Invented email (about 120 words)

> ***Subject:*** *Prospective PhD applicant: cassava virus diagnostics and your work on resistance genes*
> *Dear Professor Hartley-Boyce,*
> *I am a plant pathologist from Kenya preparing a PhD application to the Department of Plant Sciences for entry in 2027. Your 2025 paper on virus resistance genes in cassava connects to a*

> *question that came out of my field work on diagnostics: whether new virus strains are escaping the sequences that current tests rely on.*
> *In three seasons I tested 1,420 farmers' fields with an assay I developed, and I hold sequence data from 96 infected samples. My one-page proposal and CV are attached.*
> *Are you taking new PhD students for 2027, and would this project fit your group? I would welcome any suggestions before the 8 December deadline.*
> *With thanks, Wanjiru Kamau*

In real life, cite a real publication and say what it showed, in your own words.

How to read the replies

REPLY	WHAT IT MEANS	WHAT TO DO
Specific, offers a call	Real interest	Prepare three questions, and reshape the proposal with their advice
Interested but no capacity	Fit is good, timing is not	Ask who in the department works nearby
Suggests a colleague	A redirect	Write to the colleague and mention the introduction
Polite, general	Low priority	Follow up once, then move on
No reply after 10 days and one follow-up	Silence	Move on, and keep applying

Do not

- Mass-email everyone in the department with the same text.
- Promise that Gates will pay for them, or ask for a guarantee of a place.
- Open with praise instead of a specific question.
- Send a 20-page CV.
- Wait until the week of the deadline.

Structure of the proposal

The length and format come from the department's own guidance and the portal, so follow those first. These are proportions, not word counts.

SECTION	SHARE	WHAT IT MUST DO
Title	One line	Names the question, not just the topic
Background and gap	25%	The problem, what is known, and the specific thing nobody can yet answer
Aims and questions	10%	Two or three questions or hypotheses a panel could check
Methods	30%	What you will do, with what data or materials, and why it can answer the question
Feasibility and timeline	15%	A three or four year plan. Gates funds a PhD for up to four years, so show the work fits
Contribution and impact	10%	Who benefits and how, honestly stated
Fit with the department	5%	Why this group, this facility, this supervisor
References	As needed	Real, current and relevant

An opening paragraph that works (invented)

> *Cassava brown streak disease can destroy more than half of a smallholder's root harvest before symptoms appear in the leaves, and in East Africa the virus is evolving faster than the diagnostics designed to detect it. Current field tests rely on conserved genome regions, but we do not know whether the newest strains carry mutations in those regions. This project asks whether sequence variation in the capsid and polymerase genes of virus strains collected in western Kenya since 2018 predicts false negatives in the widely used rapid assays, and whether an assay built on the most stable sites would stay accurate for a decade. The answer would tell farmers and national programmes which tests to trust.*

WHY IT WORKS.

A smart non-specialist can follow it. It states a gap, then a question that a method could settle, then who benefits. It makes no grand claims about solving food security.

Practical points

- Gates does not cover bench fees or scientific equipment, and expects the academic department to cover core course costs. Make sure the work you propose is feasible within what your department can provide.
- Fieldwork: the Trust can consider allowing you to keep your normal maintenance allowance during fieldwork on a PhD, but it does not fund other fieldwork costs. Plan the budget accordingly.
- Keep the proposal and the admission statement consistent. They are read together.

Research proposal checklist

- [ ] I have read two recent papers by each potential supervisor and can say what they found
- [ ] I have written to at least two people in the department, once each
- [ ] My proposal states a gap, two or three questions and a method that can answer them
- [ ] A non-specialist can follow the first paragraph
- [ ] The timeline fits within four years
- [ ] The impact paragraph says who benefits, honestly
- [ ] I can defend every claim for 10 minutes

08 SECTION 8

The Gates Cambridge reference

The Gates reference is a third, independent test of the four criteria, and it asks your referee to rank you, so the best referee is someone who can say "exceptional" and defend it. On top

of the two academic references required for admission, you must arrange a separate reference that sets out how you meet the scholarship's criteria. It is used the same way as your four answers: to distinguish between candidates already nominated by their departments.

What the form asks your referee

- For an assessment of your suitability against the four criteria: intellectual ability, justification for the choice of course, commitment to improving the lives of others and leadership capacity.
- How highly they would rank you for a Gates Cambridge Scholarship.
- On what overall group they are basing the ranking.
- The size of that group.
- A rating: exceptional, strong, not strong or weak.

They may type or paste up to 4,000 characters into the online form, or upload a separate letter.

The ranking, the group and its size make it a comparison. "The best of 400 students I have taught in 12 years" says far more than "an outstanding student." A referee who rates you "strong" is telling the panel you are not exceptional, so choose someone who can honestly and specifically say more.

Who should write it

The site says to ask someone of appropriate standing, who can answer with authority and who understands the criteria, the competitiveness of the programme and Cambridge's academic standards. Typical choices:

- A current or former academic advisor who knows your personal qualities.
- A current or former employer.
- A senior member of an organisation where you volunteered.

One of your two academic referees can also write the Gates reference. That is fine if they know you well and write specifically about the Gates criteria, not a third academic reference. Do not ask a friend, a relative or anyone unable to speak to your suitability.

Choose with this test

QUESTION	WHY IT MATTERS
Have they seen me do the thing first-hand?	Specific examples beat general praise
Can they rank me against a named group of real size?	The form asks for it
Do they have enough standing for a Cambridge panel to trust their judgement?	A title helps, but only with real knowledge
Will they write about my commitment and leadership, not only my grades?	Two of the four criteria are not academic
Will they brief themselves on the criteria and meet the deadline?	A late reference can sink the application

A famous referee who barely knows you will lose to a less famous one who has watched you work for three years.

Matching referees to criteria

Three people, three jobs. This is the arrangement that works for most applicants.

REFEREE	MAIN JOB	GIVES FIRST-HAND EVIDENCE OF
Academic referee 1 (admission)	Course suitability	Intellectual ability, research skill
Academic referee 2 (admission)	Academic rank and potential	Intellectual ability, comparative standing
Gates referee	The four Gates criteria	Improving lives and leadership, plus a ranked judgement

If your strongest evidence of leadership and commitment comes from work outside university, your Gates referee should come from that world, such as an organisation director who saw it.

How to brief your referee

The site says it is essential that the Gates referee is fully briefed on the scholarship and its criteria, that they use specific examples, and that they stay focused on the criteria without rehashing a

standard reference. Send a short pack at least four weeks before the deadline.

1. **A cover note.** What Gates Cambridge is, the four criteria, the ranking question and the deadline, with a link to the Criteria and How to apply pages.
2. **Your thread.** The three or four stories you hope they can speak to, and where each one happened in their presence.
3. **Your CV.** And any figures they might cite, so they cite them correctly.
4. **A request for honesty.** Ask whether they feel able to rate you highly. If not, find another referee.
5. **A reminder schedule.** Agree dates for a first draft, and send polite reminders at three weeks, one week and three days.

Do not write the reference for them. Give facts and let them use their own words. A reference that sounds like your answers is easy to spot and weakens both.

Invented briefing email (about 170 words)

> *Dear Dr Otieno,*
> *Thank you for agreeing to support my Gates Cambridge application. Gates asks for a separate reference that is not a repeat of my academic references, and it will be used to compare me with other candidates the department has already nominated.*
> *Gates judges four things: intellectual ability, my reasons for choosing the course, a commitment to improving the lives of others, and leadership. Because you directed the testing project, you are the only person who has seen the last two first-hand.*
> *It asks you to rate me exceptional, strong, not strong or weak, to rank me, and to say which group you are ranking me against and how large it is. If you cannot honestly rate me highly, I would rather you tell me now.*
> *I attach the criteria, my CV and a page of the three episodes I hope you can speak to. The deadline is 8 December at 11:59pm UK time, and I would be grateful for a draft by 20 November.*
> *With thanks, Wanjiru*

Weak versus strong referee statements

WEAK	STRONG
"She is an outstanding student and a natural leader."	"In 14 years of supervising I have worked with about 300 students. She is in the top three."
"She cares deeply about the community."	"For three seasons she funded the testing project from her own savings, and she has trained 12 officers to run it after she leaves."
"She would make a fine Gates Scholar."	"I rate her exceptional. I rank her first among the 40 applicants I have advised for international funding."

Reference checklist

- [ ] My Gates referee has seen my commitment and leadership first-hand
- [ ] They can name a group and a size for the ranking, and rate me "exceptional"
- [ ] I sent the briefing pack at least four weeks before the deadline
- [ ] They know not to repeat a standard academic reference
- [ ] Both academic referees and the Gates referee have a confirmed date to submit
- [ ] I have reminders set for three weeks, one week and three days before the deadline

09 SECTION 9

The interview

The interview is 25 to 30 minutes with a subject panel, it tests all four criteria again, and it is the only stage where you can answer a follow-up question. Everyone invited has already been nominated by their department after what the site calls an incredibly competitive process, so you are being compared with other strong candidates and the panel is looking for the person who also fits the programme.

The facts

ITEM	WHAT THE SITE SAYS
Who is invited	Applicants nominated by their academic department
Length	25 to 30 minutes
Format	In person or online. The Trust encourages in-person where you can attend, and says panels are experienced with online interviews and take steps to give online candidates the same opportunity
Panels	Four subject panels: Arts, Biological Sciences, Physical Sciences, Social Sciences
Who sits on it	Experienced academics and practitioners, and possibly Gates Cambridge alumni and a Trust representative
Expenses	One night's accommodation and parking if required
Multiple nominations	If you are nominated for more than one course, you choose which to progress with, and you are interviewed once
Feedback	None, for any unsuccessful applicant, including after interview

The four sections, and what each is testing

SECTION	WHAT THEY ASK ABOUT	WHAT THEY ARE REALLY TESTING
1. Welcome and introduction	The chair introduces the panel and sets out the format	Whether you are composed. Short, so be warm and brief
2. Gates Cambridge	What you know about the scholarship, your motivation, why you could be a Scholar, and the opportunities and responsibilities of a prestigious full-cost scholarship	Do you understand what this is, and do you take it seriously as a responsibility?
3. Academic and career plans	Your academic work, a convincing justification for your Cambridge course, and how the scholarship and course link to your career. Possibly probing intellectual or ethical questions with no right answer	Can you convey real passion for your subject, defend the course, and think under pressure?

SECTION	WHAT THEY ASK ABOUT	WHAT THEY ARE REALLY TESTING
4. Final thoughts and questions	Anything you want to add, and optional questions for the panel	A chance to leave the last impression

The time split is not published. As a planning guess, expect roughly 2 minutes for the welcome, 7 to 9 on Gates, 12 to 15 on academic and career plans, and 2 for closing.

What you must know cold

- **The mission.** A global network of future leaders committed to improving the lives of others.
- **The criteria.** All four, in your own words, with your evidence for each.
- **The values.** Compassion, Learning, Internationality, Community, Change. Know what each means to you.
- **The programme.** Around 70 awards a year, about 250 Scholars in residence, 1,700+ alumni from 116 countries, and the community events that Scholars run and attend.
- **Your proposal and course.** To the level of detail where you can draw it on a whiteboard.
- **Your own file.** Every number and name in your four answers.

The story bank

Build six stories before you practise. Each should be one minute and carry exact numbers. Tag each to the criteria it proves.

STORY	PROVES	KEY NUMBER	USED IN
Your strongest academic piece of work	Academic excellence		Q1
The moment you found the gap	Choice of course		Q2
Your main commitment to others	Improving lives		Q3
A second, smaller commitment	Improving lives		Q3 follow-up
Your leadership initiative	Leadership		Q4
A failure and what you changed	Learning, humility		Any

Have one story you did not put on the form. Panels often ask for another example.

Question bank with the thinking behind each

Section 2: Gates Cambridge

QUESTION	WHAT A STRONG ANSWER DOES
What do you know about Gates Cambridge, and why are you applying?	Names the mission and one specific thing (a criterion, a value, a part of the community), then ties it to your plan in one sentence
Why could you be a Gates Cambridge Scholar?	Picks two criteria, gives one concrete proof each, and does not claim all four equally
What are the responsibilities of a full-cost scholarship at Cambridge?	Has a view with two or three parts (see the sample answer below)
What will you contribute to the Gates community?	One specific, realistic offer. Not "my perspective"
How do you define improving the lives of others?	Your own definition in one sentence, with your evidence
What would you do if you did not get this scholarship?	An honest alternative. It shows commitment to the plan, not the funding

Section 3: Academic and career

QUESTION	WHAT A STRONG ANSWER DOES
Explain your research to a non-specialist	Two minutes. Problem, why it matters, what you will do, what could go wrong
What is the weakest part of your proposal?	Names a real risk and how you would handle it. Not a hidden strength
Why this course at Cambridge and not elsewhere?	Uses the specific features in your Question 2, said in speech
What if your main hypothesis is wrong?	Shows you would learn from it and what the next question would be

QUESTION	WHAT A STRONG ANSWER DOES
What will you be doing in ten years?	A role, a place and a scale, linked to the criteria
Tell me about a time you failed	A real failure, a specific change in behaviour afterwards

Probing intellectual and ethical questions

The site says these have no right answers. The panel is watching how you think. Use four steps: take a position, give two reasons, face the strongest objection, and show you can update. Examples of the type: Should scholars trained abroad be expected to return? Who should decide which problems receive research funding? Is it fair for a scholarship to prize leadership experience? Can a technology be developed if it may be misused?

Two sample answers (invented)

"What are the responsibilities of a full-cost scholarship?" (about 110 words)

> *I see three. The first is to use the opportunity for the purpose it was given. Gates funds the whole cost of study because it expects the work to reach people beyond the degree, so my research has to be able to leave the lab. The second is to the others who applied: there are around 70 places and many equally able candidates, so I owe it to them to use mine well. The third is to the community. The Trust describes a place where Scholars support each other, so I want to give as well as receive. I would run a plant-health clinic for students from agricultural universities, because I wish I had had one.*

"Should scholars trained abroad return home?" (about 150 words)

> *I think the better question is whether the knowledge returns, not only whether the person does. My own plan is to return to Kenya, because the testing service I describe needs someone the farmer cooperatives trust, and that took three years to build. But I would not make it a rule. A virologist who stays abroad and builds a sequencing partnership with African institutions might do more for cassava farmers than one who returns to a laboratory without reagents. The strongest objection is that without a duty to return, a scholarship funds a brain drain, and I take that seriously. So I would judge a scholar by what moves back: students trained, data shared, partnerships kept. I may be wrong about how far that can replace being physically there, and I would like to hear what Gates Scholars have found.*

Why they work. Both give a view in the first sentence, offer reasons, admit a limit and stay concrete. Neither reads like a recital.

Preparation plan

WHEN	WHAT TO DO
From the day you submit	Build the story bank. Re-read your four answers and your proposal as the panel will
Before the invitation	Run two mock interviews with someone who has not read your application
Within a week of the invitation	One mock with an academic from outside your field. Record it and watch it
In the last 48 hours	Revise your story bank. Do not memorise answers
The day before	Set up the room and the technology, or the route and the timing

On the day

1. **Answer first, then evidence.** One sentence of answer, then the proof, under 90 seconds.
2. **Say "I" for your actions and "we" for the team, precisely.**
3. **Pause before a hard question.** A two-second pause reads as thought.
4. **If you do not know, say so and reason aloud.** The panel tests how you think.
5. **Do not recite.** If it sounds like a paragraph from your form, break it up.
6. **Use your closing time.** Add one thing they have not heard, or ask a real question.

Good questions to ask the panel

Only ask what the website does not already answer. For example: What do Scholars from my field most often wish they had known before arriving? How do Scholars typically contribute to the community beyond their department? What do you hope the next cohort will take forward?

Common interview mistakes

- Reading from notes or reciting the form.
- Claiming more than your reference could confirm.
- No view on the responsibilities of the scholarship.
- Not being able to discuss your proposal in depth.

- Naming famous people you cannot discuss for two minutes.
- Answers longer than two minutes.
- Being negative about your home institution or country without a reason.

Interview checklist

- [ ] I can state the Gates mission, four criteria and five values in my own words
- [ ] I have six one-minute stories with exact numbers, and one not on my form
- [ ] I can explain my research or career plan in two minutes to a non-specialist
- [ ] I have a view on the responsibilities of a full-cost scholarship
- [ ] I have practised the four-step approach on at least three ethical questions
- [ ] I have done at least two mock interviews, one with someone outside my field
- [ ] My technology or travel is arranged, and I have a question to ask

10 SECTION 10

Funding, community and what they signal

A Gates Cambridge Scholarship covers the full cost of study at Cambridge and adds discretionary funding for development, family and hardship, so the Trust is making a large, long-term bet on each person it selects. Read the funding as a statement of what Gates expects back: a Scholar who studies hard and joins a community that is meant to last a lifetime.

Core funding (2026-27 rates)

COMPONENT	WHAT IT COVERS
University Composition Fee	At the appropriate rate for your student type. If a public body such as UKRI awards you a fee award, you should accept it and the Trust will not pay the fee or may share costs

COMPONENT	WHAT IT COVERS
Maintenance allowance	£23,152 for 12 months for a single student, pro rata for shorter courses. For PhD Scholars, up to 4 years
Airfare	One economy single fare at the start and one at the end of the course
Visa costs	Inbound visa costs and the Immigration Health Surcharge

Discretionary funding (applied for, not automatic)

TYPE	WHAT THE SITE SAYS
Academic development	From up to £750 to up to £4,000, depending on course length, for conferences and courses
Dependent Children Allowance	Up to £12,793 a year for one child and up to £18,244 a year for two or more. No funding is provided for a partner
Fieldwork	You may apply to keep up to your normal maintenance allowance during PhD fieldwork. Other fieldwork costs should be covered by the University Composition Fee
Maternity or paternity	You may apply to intermit for up to 6 months and keep your maintenance allowance
Hardship	For unforeseen difficulties

What is not covered

- Bench fees and the costs of scientific equipment or similar academic resources. The Trust expects the academic department to cover core course costs.
- A salary or another substantial scholarship may reduce or stop the standard maintenance allowance. Tell the Trust as soon as you are awarded other funding.

What the funding signals

SIGNAL	WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR APPLICATION
Full cost, plus extras	The Trust expects a return, so Questions 3 and 4 should show a clear path from the funding to other people
Academic development funding	Mention in an interview how you would use it, for example a named conference where your future audience gathers
No partner funding, a child allowance	If you have family responsibilities, plan the budget before you apply
Fieldwork rule	If your PhD has fieldwork, check with the department that the rest of the cost is covered
Needs-blind selection	Do not use finances as an argument. Use commitment and potential

The experience: what the Trust describes

The Experience page describes what you join beyond the degree. It is useful for your "what will I contribute" answer and for the interview.

PART	WHAT THE SITE SAYS
Your course	Your primary purpose is to dedicate yourself to your degree. The department is a main academic community
Scholar community	Orientation, a welcome dinner, professional development events through the Learning for Purpose programme, an annual lecture, a Gala, Scholar symposia and a Graduation Dinner. The Scholars' Council hosts many events and helps Scholars host their own. There is a Scholars' Room as a physical hub
Your College	Every graduate student joins one of 31 Colleges. They are communities of scholars across disciplines
Alumni network	Online through the Gates Connect platform, informal meet-ups and alumni events worldwide. The Scholars' Alumni Advisory Committee works with the Trust
Scholars' own initiatives	The page highlights ClimaTRACES, a climate and sustainability research initiative launched by two Gates Scholars as one of three inaugural labs at CRASSH in May 2024

The University page adds that about 20,000 students study at Cambridge, 7,500 of them graduates, half from overseas and more than 40 per cent women.

Turn this into a contribution plan

A strong applicant is ready with one concrete offer to the community. Use this three-line frame.

STEP	EXAMPLE
What you will give	A monthly plant-health clinic for students from agricultural universities
Where it fits	Through the Scholars' Council or a symposium
Why you	You ran a testing programme and trained 14 volunteers, so you can teach it

Keep it small, realistic and linked to your record. The Trust describes a community, not a stage.

11 SECTION 11

Mistakes that sink Gates applications

The cheapest wins are in process and consistency, not in clever writing. Because Gates gives no feedback, you will not be told which one hurt you, so check this list before you submit.

Process and eligibility

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
Wrong round or wrong deadline	US citizens resident in the US who miss October are not eligible for the later round. Everyone else must use the Course Funding Deadline	Check the round and the Course Directory date in the first week
An ineligible course	MASt, MSt, PGDip, MBA and part-time masters are not funded	Check the Eligibility page and the FAQ list
A thin admission application	The department nominates first. A weak admission case means no nomination	Give the admission personal statement, transcripts and references as much care as the Gates answers
A late or missing reference	Every document, references included, is due by 11:59pm UK time, and you cannot edit after submitting	Confirm referee dates in writing and submit a week early

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
Treating the Gates reference as an afterthought	It is a ranked, comparative judgement on all four criteria	Choose the referee early and brief them with the pack in section 8

The four answers

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
Q1 repeats the transcript	The panel already has it	Describe the work behind the grades
Q2 praises Cambridge	The panel knows. It wants your reasons	Pass the swap test in the Question 2 guide
Q3 is a list of activities	Activity is not commitment	Show duration, cost and a change in people's lives
Q3 sounds like rescue	Positions others as passive and you as hero	Give people agency and credit partners
Q4 offers a title	A role does not show leadership	Show an obstacle, a decision and someone you moved
Q4 says "we" throughout	The panel cannot see what you did	Say what the team did, then what you decided
Vague futures in Q2 to Q4	All three ask how this links to your plans	Give a role, a place, a year and a scale
Using need as the argument	Gates is needs-blind	Use background as the root of your commitment, not as a plea

Consistency

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
Four unconnected stories	You look like someone assembling a profile	Build the thread in section 6

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
The same story four times	It looks as though you have nothing else	One story per answer, two at most
Sentences copied between the admission statement and the Gates answers	Gates reads the whole application	Share names and facts, not wording
A referee who contradicts you, or cannot confirm your story	Three sources should agree	Brief them and let them write in their own words
Numbers you cannot defend	The interview will test them	Use only figures you could explain for two minutes

Interview and mindset

MISTAKE	WHY IT COSTS YOU	FIX
No view on the responsibilities of a full-cost scholarship	It is an announced interview topic	Prepare a three-part answer
Reciting your form	The panel wants to hear you think	Practise with the story bank, not a script
Not knowing your own proposal	Panels probe it	Prepare to explain it to a non-specialist in two minutes
Treating a rejection as a verdict	The Trust gives no feedback and says an earlier rejection does not count against a later one	Debrief with your referees, and reapply if the plan still stands

If you spot a mistake before you submit

Fix it now. You cannot edit once you have submitted, so a typo you find on 9 December costs you more than the week you spent finding it. If you spot one after, email info@gatescambridge.org promptly and ask whether anything can be done, but plan as though nothing can.

Final checklist and working plan

If you do nothing else in the next seven days, confirm your round, fix your course, ask your referees and write the one-page thread. Everything later depends on those four.

Your next seven days (21 to 28 October)

1. Confirm your round and your Course Funding Deadline in the Course Directory. Email info@gatescambridge.org if you are unsure.
2. Confirm your course is eligible and that you can start in 2027/28.
3. Fill in the one-page thread from section 6.
4. If you are applying for a PhD, shortlist supervisors and send your first emails (section 7).
5. Shortlist your three referees and ask each one whether they can support you strongly and meet the date (section 8).
6. Start the admission application. The department's nomination is the first gate.

Working plan if your deadline is 6 January 2027

If you have until 6 January, do not let the holiday period decide your schedule. Referees travel and offices close in late December.

BY	WHAT SHOULD BE DONE
6 November	Round, course and supervisor emails done; referees asked; thread written
4 December	First full draft of all four answers; proposal draft (PhD); briefing packs sent
18 December	Second drafts read by two outsiders; admission statement final; referee drafts agreed
23 December	Application submitted. Confirm every reference is in
6 January, 11:59pm UK	Hard deadline. Do not plan to use it

For 8 December, use the plan at the end of section 4.

The master checklist

Eligibility and process

- [ ] I am a citizen of a country outside the UK, and I know which round I am in
- [ ] My course is eligible, full-time (or a PhD), and not already under way
- [ ] I know my Course Funding Deadline and my referees' dates
- [ ] I have completed the admission section and the Gates funding section

The thread

- [ ] My one-page thread is filled in and consistent across all four answers
- [ ] Each answer uses a different story, or a different half of one
- [ ] Q2, Q3 and Q4 all point to the same future plan

The four answers

- [ ] Q1 (about 200 words, under 1,400 characters): the work behind the grades
- [ ] Q2 (about 200 words, under 1,400 characters): specific, passes the swap test
- [ ] Q3 (about 300 words, under 2,100 characters): commitment with duration, cost, outcome and a real "why"
- [ ] Q4 (about 300 words, under 2,100 characters): an obstacle, a decision, someone I moved, a lasting result
- [ ] Every number is exact and one I can defend
- [ ] Every name is real, correct and attached to something I did

PhD only

- [ ] My proposal states a gap, questions and a method, and fits in four years
- [ ] I have contacted potential supervisors

References

- [ ] Two academic referees and one Gates referee have agreed
- [ ] The Gates referee can rate me "exceptional" and name a group and size
- [ ] Each has been briefed and has a submission date before the deadline

Submission

- [ ] Two outsiders have read my answers, one from another field
- [ ] I have checked every name, figure and spelling
- [ ] I submitted at least a week early and confirmed every reference arrived

Interview

- [ ] I have a story bank, a view on responsibilities and a two-minute research explanation
- [ ] I have done two mock interviews

The final rule

Do not tell Gates you are a leader who improves lives. Give them a person, a decision, a number and a change, and let them reach the conclusion themselves.

13 SECTION 13

Sources and official links

All Gates Cambridge pages below were opened and read on 21 October 2026. Dates, funding rates and application caps change each cycle, so confirm them on the live page before acting.

PAGE	WHAT THIS GUIDE TOOK FROM IT
Homepage	Mission, values, community figures

PAGE	WHAT THIS GUIDE TOOK FROM IT
The scholarship	Number of awards, criteria list, funding amounts, exclusions
The experience	Community events, Scholars' Council, alumni network, Colleges
The University	Size of the University, Colleges
Eligibility	Who can apply, eligible and ineligible courses, current Cambridge students
Criteria	The four criteria and needs-blind admissions
Timeline	Rounds, deadlines, panel and offer dates for 2027/28 entry
How to apply	The combined form, four questions and word limits, research proposal, Gates reference
How we select	Departmental nomination, interview format and sections
Frequently Asked Questions	Courses, applications cap, English test, feedback, interviews
Our values	The CLICC values

Other official pages this guide points you to:

- University Course Directory for your Course Funding Deadline.
- University Graduate Application Portal for the combined application.
- info@gatescambridge.org for any application question.

Notes on method

- The structure of this guide, a general strategy section followed by one section per answer with worked examples, follows the style of The Application Lab's free Chevening and Commonwealth guides.
- All applicants, organisations, supervisors, numbers and quotations in the worked examples are invented. They show technique and are not drawn from real applications.

- Statements about what Gates "wants" or what a strong answer "should" do are my reading of the pages above, not a statement by the Trust. The Trust gives no feedback and publishes no scoring sheet.