



Freshers' Arabic reading list

Before you start your BA, you'll want to read around the language and the subject, but until you're enrolled as an undergraduate, you won't have access to the Bodleian Libraries' online resources, and your local library may not have much to offer.

In this document, you will find a very short introduction to the Arabic course. We have split the document into two. First, you can find resources and information about the language side of your course. Below, you will find further information regarding history, literature, art and religion, all of which, at some point or another, you will study as part of your degree.

For those of you take Arabic only within the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, you will take the first year Islamic Culture and History paper. This paper will follow two streams. On the historical stream, you will learn about the early spread of Islam, the art and architecture of the Muslim world, the Ottomans, the Safavids/Qajars and the modern Middle East; on the cultural stream, you will be introduced to themes in the study of Islam, Arabic, Persian and Turkish literatures, and modern Middle Eastern anthropology and/or modern art in the Arab world.

These disciplines (the study of history, literature, religion and art) will be picked up again by all students of Arabic in their third-year studies. For this reason, it would be a very useful idea to have a brief read around the subject before your arrival here at Oxford, in order to give you a base level of knowledge from which to work!

None of the following books are compulsory, but good starting point and/or recommended titles are indicated with an asterisk (***) .



Language

Before you start studying the detail of the language with us, you'll find it helpful to have an overview of it. Many modern languages, including English, have distinctly different formal and informal versions, but there's a certain amount of mixing and mingling, in writing as well as orally. Arabic is rather different. Mixing and mingling happen orally, but not in writing, and a lot of "oral" Arabic, especially the kind that you'll be taught, is actually formal Arabic spoken from a written script, as in news broadcasts. This formal language, whether written or spoken, is known by many names, including Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), literary Arabic, Classical Arabic (CA), or *Fuṣḥā* (to use the Arabic term). This is the language that you'll study, not the vernacular dialects, which don't have a written form by and large; with a formal knowledge of MSA, you will be able to pick up vernacular dialects easily on your year abroad!

A good place to begin is the alphabet, which you will cover in the first few weeks of instruction. The following is a handy introduction which you will consult in class:

Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi, *Alif Baa Introduction to Arabic Letters and Sounds* (3rd edn., 2010)

A concise overview, which is designed for self-teaching and is also handy for reference, is:

David Cowan, *Modern Literary Arabic* (1958 and reprints) – this can be accessed for free here:

<https://archive.org/details/AnIntroductionToModernLiteraryArabic>

Much larger, but designed for the same purposes, is:

JA Haywood and HM Nahmad, *A New Arabic Grammar of the Written Language* (1965 and reprints) - this can be accessed for free here:

https://www.academia.edu/44725158/A_New_Arabic_Grammar_of_the_Written_A

In all languages, Arabic included, **handwriting** is different from typeface. You need to learn to read and write handwriting from the start, and you can start to

do this independently of learning the language! It's a good thing to do over the summer. If you come equipped with good handwriting, you'll be able to take notes more quickly and more accurately, understand what's written on the whiteboard, and generally have a head start.

Here is a **free** online resource which teaches written forms, not imitations of print, and guides you through the steps of combining and linking letters:

<http://www.bitesizearabic.com/downloads/BSA-writing-workbook.pdf>

There are plenty of other free resources you'll find online. Make sure you're learning how to **handwrite** – it's much easier (and more normal-looking) than imitating print!

While you're learning to write Arabic, why not learn to **type** it too?

If you use a Mac and most PCs, you can simply add the Arabic keyboard to your computer in the settings app.

You may want to purchase a keyboard cover, such as this one:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Kuzy-Language-Keyboard-MacBook-Silicone-White/dp/B00AVBLGZG>

It will allow you to add stickers to your keyboard or lay a cover over it with the Arabic letters in the correct place. This will make typing much easier!

If not, Microsoft Word now has Arabic versions (e.g. Arabic QWERTY) that come free as part of the package. Find a version and add it to your pull-down menu. Word will join up the letters for you. On the other hand, adding vowel signs is rather laborious.

You'll probably find that you type much more slowly in Arabic than in English, but it's a valuable skill! Increasingly, we are asking students not to transliterate in their essays, but to write in Arabic script, so you will get more practised at using it over time!



As for the other components of this degree – History, Literature, Religion, Art – you may like to have a look in your local library. Modern Middle Eastern History, for example, ought to be something on which you could find a fair few resources!

Otherwise, we have listed a couple of titles each below which can be bought quite cheaply online:

History

***Michael Cook, *A History of the Muslim World* (2024)

Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1991 and later edns.)

***Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (Revised and Updated; 2018)

Religion

***Malise Ruthven, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (2000 and later edns)

Nile Green, *Global Islam: A Very Short Introduction* (2020)

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (2022; and earlier edns)

The Qur'an (Oxford World Classics), tr. M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem (2008; and other edns); you could also read www.quran.com for a free (albeit not scholarly) translation!

Art

Khamseen. Islamic Art History online is a University of Michigan free access portal:

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/khamseen/>

It has presentations and videos made by experts on topics from early Islamic architecture to contemporary art.

Otherwise, you might like to go and visit a museum local to you which might have a gallery dedicated to the art of the Islamic World. The Ashmolean, here

at Oxford, has a small gallery; other (sometimes larger) galleries can be found at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum, the Fitzwilliam Museum (Cambridge), the Artz-i Islamic Art and Gifts Gallery (Bradford), The Manchester Museum (Manchester), Leeds City Museum (Leeds) and several others. Have a look online and see if there are any exhibitions coming up!

Classical Literature

The Library of Arabic Literature is a project which produces facing-text Arabic editions and English translations of Arabic writing of all genres and all places and periods stopping short of the twentieth century (poetry, cookery, law, sufism, history, storytelling, philosophy, travel). You can buy many of its titles for about £15 online.

More importantly, however, its [blog](#) is a treasure trove of writing and ideas about the books that have been translated and it's completely free!

Beyond that, the best two anthologies that we would recommend are:

***Robert Irwin (ed.), *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature* (2006)

Geert Jan Van Gelder (tr.), *Classical Arabic Literature: A Library of Arabic Literature Anthology* (2013)

Other classic texts are being translated frequently. You may want to have a browse of any of the following titles:

Tale of the Princess Fatima, Warrior Woman (tr. Melanie Magidow)

The Travels of Ibn Battuta (ed. Tim Mackintosh Smith)

Arabian Nights' Entertainment (OWC edition) (tr. Robert L. Mack) – for really interested students, you might instead opt for the 3 volume Penguin edition!

If you would like to read more about this famous text, see Robert Irwin, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion*

Al-Jahiz, *The Book of the Misers* (tr. Robert Serjeant)

Al-Nuwayri, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition* (tr. Elias Muhanna)

Modern Literature

There are not many free resources for modern Arabic literature. You might like to have a browse of [ArabLit Quaterly](#), which includes articles and interviews about the subject. You might also want to have a listen to the Bulaq podcast, which features interviews and discussions about modern Arabic literature.

Beyond that, below is an excellent anthology of modern Arabic literature:

*** Sabry Hafez and Catherine Cobham, *A Reader of Modern Arabic Short Stories* (2001)

Otherwise, head down to your local bookshop or library and have a look out for translated fiction or poetry. Some recent(-ish) excellent titles and some classics include:

Jokha Alharthi, *Celestial Bodies* (tr. Marilyn Booth)

Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (tr. Jonathan Wright)

Hassan Blasim, *The Iraqi Christ* (tr. Jonathan Wright)

Tayyib Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (tr. Denys Johnson-Davis)

Tayyib Salih, *The Wedding of Zain and Other Stories* (tr. Denys Johnson-Davis)

Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*

Naguib Mahfouz, *The Cairo Trilogy* (tr. Various)

Sonallah Ibrahim, *Zaat* (tr. Anthony Calderbank)

Ghada al-Samman, *Beirut Nightmares* (tr. Nancy Roberts)

Ghassan Kanafani, *Men in the Sun* (tr. Hilary Kilpatrick)

Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise* (Selected Poems)

Nizar Qabbani, *On Entering the Sea* (tr. Lena Jayyusi and Sharif Elmusa)

Reading for Pleasure

Along with the above-listed books, which will be directly useful for your studies, there are many works of fiction and travel writing which can awaken an interest in the Middle East, its languages, and cultures. Here are some favorites:

William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain* (1997)

Amin Maalouf, *Leo Africanus* (1986)

Amin Maalouf, *Samarkand* (1988)

Amin Maalouf, *The Rock of Tanios* (1993)

Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Yemen: Travels in Dictionary Land* (1999)

Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Travels with a Tangerine: A Journey in the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah* (2002)

Wilfred Thesiger, *The Marsh Arabs* (1964)

Finally, the below is a good introduction to the study of modern Arabic literature: Paul Starkey, *Modern Arabic Literature* (2006)