

Oxford University Cave Club

Guidance notes for novices

[Reviewed and slightly updated by SGR, October 2024.]

1 Before leaving Oxford

1.1 *Personal details, etc.*

You **must** give your name, address, etc., and those of your “Next of Kin”, to the Club before going on any caving meeting. This is for obvious reasons in case of an accident. This will normally be done by filling in the online form via the OUCC website.

1.2 *Equipment*

You will be issued with at least the following equipment:

- Light
- Helmet
- Belt
- Undersuit (this may have some tears, but it shouldn't be in shreds)
- Oversuit (likewise)
- Welly boots
- A bag to keep it all in.

This gear is expensive, and belongs to someone, or to the Club. Keep the kit you have been lent together, look after it, and return it immediately at the end of the meeting.

You should also bring (**day meetings**):

- Some underclothing for caving (knickers, t-shirt, socks). Anything you go caving in tends to acquire irremovable stains, so don't use anything you care about too much. A swimming costume can substitute usefully for the first one (male) or two (female) items and is more cave-proof. Thick woolly socks are best. We may be able to issue you with neoprene socks (“wetsocks”), but this can't be guaranteed.
- A towel if you like.
- Some money. We might eat in a pub or café after the caving trip, but you buy your own food. £15-20 should be enough.

You should also bring (**weekend meetings**):

- Underclothing for caving as for day trips
- A sleeping bag. Remember that many caving huts are unheated, at least in bedrooms.
- Usual toiletry items, spare clothes, etc.
- The Club will provide food, so you won't need money for that (but you might want a bit for a drink or two...)
- Hiking gear if you like, and have it. You might want to take a day off from caving.

1.3 Above-ground practice

If ladder climbing is involved on the trip you are going to do, you should if possible practise this on the surface before going underground (for caves with a one or two short ladders, this may not be absolutely necessary). The ladders are very flexible, and unless you have the right technique, you can get tired very quickly, no matter how strong you are. Also you need to practice the “calls” needed to ensure safe lifelining. An experienced caver will show you how to climb a ladder, and run through the “calls”. You should then have a turn.

The calls are:

Ascending:

Climber	Lifeline
Ties on lifeline	
“Take in”	Takes up slack in lifeline. (Not necessarily through belay device)
(Lifeline goes tight)	
“That’s me”	Puts lifeline through belay device. Climber is now safe.
Waits	“Climb when you’re ready”
“Climbing”	“OK”
Starts climbing	

Ascending or descending:

Climber	Lifeline
“Stop” / one shout or whistle.	Holds climber on belay and waits.
“Take in” / two shouts or whistles	Takes in any slack lifeline through belaying device.
“Slack!” / three shouts or whistles	Give climber more lifeline through belaying device.
“Falling!” / any great anguished shout	Holds climber on belay and braces to hold fall.
“Resting”	Takes in any slack lifeline through belaying device, gives partial support to climber.
“Climbing” (after “resting”)	Lifelining resumed.
“Rope free” (having reached end of climb, found a place of safety and untied from lifeline)	Retrieves lifeline.

2 Before going caving

2.1 The cave

The cave you will go down and the route within it will have been chosen to suit absolute beginners. Expect a trip of 2-3 hours. Caving involves a mixture of walking, crawling, and rock scrambling, in a mixture of open and confined spaces, with an admixture of mud and water. The cave may have an active stream in it, or it may be “fossil”. Expect to be fairly well exercised all over!

Even though most “novice” caves have unfortunately been heavily (ab)used over the years, there may be “pretties” – stalactites and stalagmites. The shapes of cave passages themselves have a certain beauty. Expect to have an interesting and enjoyable time.

2.2 The team

This will normally consist of the team leader (an experienced caver with a knowledge of the trip to be undertaken), at least one other experienced caver, and up to three novices. It may be possible that the team leader is the only experienced caver on the team, or more novices can be taken in a team, if the trip is in a well-frequented system with few hazards.

2.3 Equipment

Your team leader will show you how to put on caving clothing and equipment, and will check it over. In particular, the leader will:

- check that your helmet fits and is in good condition;
- check that your belay belt is in good condition and done up properly;
- check that your light works and will show you how to turn it on, off and on to reserve;
- check that your clothing is not excessively torn;
- check that your boots fit correctly and are in good condition.

... but if you are in any doubt about any of these matters or any other issues, *ask*.

2.4 Briefing

The leader will give you a pre-trip briefing (some or all of the briefing might also be given to the group as a whole before caving by the overall trip leader). This is to give you information about what you are about to experience and what is expected of you. Most importantly it is to brief you about safe caving practices and about conservation issues. Listen and take note. It is important.

Introduction & information:

- Introductions (leader and others)
- Your prior experience - what sorts of thing you have done related to caving (hiking, climbing, etc.)
- A brief outline of what the trip will involve, and how long it is likely to take.

Safety:

- The most important aspect of trip is that everyone returns to the surface safely; if there are any problems we just come out. This is not a hassle. We can always come back another day.
- You will be told about particular hazards of the trip you are about to do: pitches, climbs, squeezes, water hazards, etc.
- If ladder climbing is involved, you might have practised this on the surface before going underground. The leader will check whether you have done this, and that you understand the instruction code for ascending and descending a ladder.

Conservation:

- “Take only photographs, leave only echoes”. No litter to be left in the cave. No polluting the cave or cave streams (go to the toilet before going caving!). No smoking underground.

- You should follow the normal "countryside code" on the surface. Remember that we depend on the goodwill of landowners for access.

2.5 **Call out** (*meeting leader and trip leaders*)

Before going underground, each trip leader will leave a record with a responsible person, giving details of team members, cave expected time of return, etc. This is your ultimate security in case of an accident – it will ensure a rescue call-out.

3 **During the Trip**

Help make the trip safe

- Don't risk injuring yourself. If *you* get crocked, everyone else is going to suffer too. Cave rescue is difficult and lengthy; even minor injuries (twisted ankle, etc.) can significantly slow the trip, leading to further difficulties, getting cold, light problems, and so on. The leader is not superhuman!
- All team members should always stay within sight and/or hearing of those in front of or behind them. If someone gets ahead you should shout for them to wait, if someone gets left behind you should wait for them, letting those in front know. Make sure you help to keep the party together.
- If you are unsure about any climbs, ask how to do it and / or ask for a lifeline.
- You should let the leader know immediately if:
 - you feel frightened or claustrophobic
 - you feel cold or tired (remember that going out is going to be harder than going down!)
 - you feel anything you are about to do is unsafe
 - you think that your light or other equipment is giving problems
 - you have any other cause for concern about the trip, yourself or other members of the team
- At climbs or pitches needing tackle, the leader will:
 - Explain the belaying (lifeline) system
 - Send an experienced caver down first
 - Tie you in and check belt, karabiners, etc.
 - Remind you of the technique to be used

Keep conservation in mind.

- Don't damage the cave: it's delicate, unique and irreplaceable.

Enjoy it.

4 **After the Trip**

- Keep together till you have returned to the vehicle or hut
- If you need help with getting changed *out of* the caving gear, ask. (I do!)
- Check that the clothing, etc. loaned to you is kept together and put in its bag.