

# ACING THE GRE



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# ACING THE GRE



C H A P T E R

# 1



# About the GRE General Test

## The Five Ws of the GRE General Test

**1. Q:** *Who takes the GRE General Test?*

**A:** Most applicants to graduate programs take the GRE General Test.

**2. Q:** *What is on the GRE General Test?*

**A:** There are three sections: Analytical Writing, Verbal, and Quantitative.

**3. Q:** *When is the GRE General Test offered?*

**A:** The test is offered year-round.

**4. Q:** *Where can I take the GRE General Test?*

**A:** The exam is offered at testing centers throughout the United States and the world.

**5. Q:** *Why do I have to take the GRE General Test?*

**A:** Graduate programs require you to take the GRE General Test to assess your logical and critical reasoning skills.

**Why the GRE General Test?**

Before you went to college, you may have taken the SAT or another college admissions test. Those exams are designed to help colleges determine whether prospective students can do the type and level of work they will encounter in postsecondary school. The Graduate Record Exam, or GRE, like the SAT, is designed by Educational Testing Service® (ETS®), and if you took the SAT, the basic format of the GRE will seem familiar. Instead of testing college-level skills as the SAT does, the GRE assesses abilities required for success in graduate school—the ability to understand and convey ideas using language and the ability to apply basic math concepts to solve problems and analyze data. This is why many graduate programs want prospective students to take the exam. They want you to show that you can correctly analyze complex material, think logically, and clearly communicate your thoughts in written form.

**Who Takes the GRE General Test?**

Just as most colleges require prospective students to submit standardized test scores, many graduate programs want to see GRE results as well. If you are applying to a master's or doctoral program, you may need to take the exam. Of course, test results are only part of the information that schools use to make admissions decisions. Factors such as grades, recommendations, and professional experience are also considered. Universities know that some students who struggle with standardized tests perform very well in their graduate course work and vice versa. Still, the GRE is a crucial part of the admission process and one on which you naturally want to perform well.

Maybe you are thinking, “But I’m not applying to study English, and I don’t plan to use math in my work; why do I have to take this kind of test?” Still, no matter what field of study you plan to undertake in graduate school, you must be able to think clearly and logically and to express your thoughts in writing. You must be able to read and comprehend complex, densely written works, because that is the sort of material you will encounter in graduate school. And, you must be comfortable manipulating numbers and using them to represent concrete objects or abstract ideas. For example, if you want to attain a master's degree in urban planning, you may need to perform tasks such as statistical analysis of traffic flow and projections of population trends. Social workers need to use demographic numbers regarding the needs of underserved groups. Even aspiring filmmakers must confidently manipulate budget numbers. Just as college-level studies were a step up from the kind of work you did in high school, graduate school requires you to think in even more sophisticated ways. That is why graduate programs ask you to take the GRE.

**When Is the GRE General Test Offered?**

In the United States and in most countries of the world, the GRE is now administered as a computer-based test (CBT), also called a computer-adaptive test (CAT). You make an appointment to go to a testing center, where you take the exam. You may either choose a center from the list in the *GRE Registration Bulletin*, or ETS will assign you to the nearest location. The exam is offered during the first three weeks of every month, year-round.

You may want to avoid the November-through-January test-taking season when most exam takers sign up for testing. It is the busiest time of year for the test centers. However, if that is when you need to take the exam, sign up as early as possible to make sure you get the date and time you want. Remember, you want to

## Three Ways To Register

1. Call 609-771-7670 or go online to [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org) to get the official *GRE Registration Bulletin*. Mail the Authorization Voucher Request Form found in the *Bulletin* and send a check or money order as payment. Then, contact Prometric Candidate Services Call Center at 800-473-2255 to schedule an appointment.
2. Call 800-473-2255 or an individual test center near you (see list at [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org) or in the *GRE Registration Bulletin*) to register without a voucher, using VISA, MasterCard, or American Express.
3. Register online with a credit card at [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org).

leave ample time for ETS, the creators of the test, to report your scores to your chosen institution(s) by the deadline. The *Bulletin* contains information on how long it will take ETS to score your exam.

### How Do I Sign Up?

First, you must obtain the official *GRE Registration Bulletin* by calling 609-771-7670 or by downloading the information from [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org). The actual registration can be done by mail, using the Authorization Voucher Request Form found in the *Bulletin* and sending a check or money order as payment. When you receive your voucher, you can contact Prometric Candidate Services Call Center at 800-473-2255 to schedule an appointment. If you prefer, you can call that number or an individual test center near you (see list at [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org)) and register without a voucher, using a credit card. Finally, you can also register online with a credit card at [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org).

### What Is on the Test?

The GRE General Test has three sections: Analytical Writing, Verbal, and Quantitative. The Analytical Writing portion tests your ability to understand and convey complex ideas, to analyze arguments, and to present a cohesive discussion of those ideas and arguments. It is always presented first. Next, the Verbal section tests your comprehension of the logical relationships between words, as well as your vocabulary and your ability to understand and think critically about complex written material. Finally, the Quantitative section tests your competence in arithmetic, algebra, and geometry, and your ability to apply these subjects within verbal contexts (word problems). There may also be an experimental section, presented within either the Verbal or the Quantitative section. You will not be able to tell which section is experimental, however, so it is important to work equally hard on all parts of the test. One thing you can be sure of is that the experimental section is always multiple choice, never essay.

## Important Note

Format, timing, and the test-taking strategies of the paper-based General Test differ from those of the computer-based General Test.

**This book focuses primarily on the computer-based General Test.**

Please refer to the tables on the next page.

## ABOUT THE GRE GENERAL TEST

### PAPER-BASED GENERAL TEST

SECTION	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	TIME
Analytical Writing	1 Issue task	45 minutes
	1 Argument task	30 minutes
Verbal (2 sections)	38 questions per section	30 minutes per section
Quantitative (2 sections)	30 questions per section	30 minutes per section
Pretest*	Varies	30 minutes

**Total time: 3 hours 45 minutes**

### COMPUTER-BASED GENERAL TEST

SECTION	NUMBER OF QUESTIONS	TIME
Analytical Writing	1 Issue task	45 minutes
	1 Argument task	30 minutes
Verbal	30 questions	30 minutes
Quantitative	28 questions	45 minutes
Pretest*	Varies	Varies
Research**	Varies	Varies

**Total time: from 3 hours to 3 hours 15 minutes (not including the research)**

\* An undisclosed verbal or quantitative pretest section may be included and may appear in any order after the analytical writing section. It is not counted as part of your score.

\*\* An undisclosed research section may be included at the end of the test. It is not counted as part of your score.

### How Long Is the Exam?

You are allowed four hours for the CBT/CAT exam, though the timed portion is 3 hours 45 minutes for the paper-based General Test and up to 3 hours 15 minutes for the computer-based General Test. There is a ten-minute break after the Analytical Writing section and a one-minute break between the two subsequent sections.

You may take as long as you need within the four-hour limit to familiarize yourself with the CBT/CAT format. You will want to familiarize yourself with the computer and the procedure before you begin the timed portion of the test, so plan to allow yourself the full four hours to avoid adding time pressure to any other stress you might be feeling.

There is a Help menu, which can be accessed at will, but if you need it during the actual exam, you will be using your precious minutes while the clock ticks. Be sure you have answered all your questions *about* the test *before* you start answering the actual test questions. That's what test-preparation material is for, so use it. Also, there is a clock that appears onscreen during the exam, so you can see how much time you have left in any given section. If the clock bothers you, you can hide it. It will still come back onscreen to alert you when you have five minutes left in the section.

## Seven Skills for Analytical Writing

- Critical thinking
- Logical organization
- Strong development of ideas
- Support of ideas with examples and evidence
- Appropriate word choice
- Clear and effective sentences
- Command of standard written English conventions

### What Is a CBT/CAT?

A CBT/CAT is a test administered at a computer. CBT stands for computer-based test and CAT stands for computer-adaptive test. Special software enables the computer to accurately determine your proficiency at a given task within a short time. In brief, every test taker gets a different set of questions. The computer uses your performance on the early questions to give either easier or more difficult subsequent questions. This is the *adaptive* part. The harder the questions you successfully answer, the higher your score. You will find more information and specific strategies for CBT/CATs on the following pages.

### What Is the Format of the Test?

The computer-based test is comprised of four sections, one of which is a pretest section that will appear after the Analytical Writing section in no particular order. Questions in the pretest section are tried for possible use in future tests and will not be counted toward your score. A research section may also appear as part of your test and will also not count toward your score. Questions in the research section are included for the purpose of ETS research.

At the beginning of each section, you will be presented with directions specifying the total number of questions and time allotted for each particular section. Total testing time is up to 3 hours 15 minutes, not counting the research section. The Analytical Writing section will always appear first. The Verbal and Quantitative sections will appear in any random order, including an unidentified pretest section, which may be either Verbal or Quantitative. Because you cannot predict which section is a pretest and which will count toward your score, treat each section with equal significance.

### What Is in the Analytical Writing Section?

The Analytical Writing section was added to the GRE General Test in 2002. There are always two tasks, one in which you are required to write about your perspective on a particular topic, and one in which you need to critique a given argument. You will spend 75 minutes on this two-part task, the first section to be presented on the exam.

Neither of these tasks requires any specialized content knowledge. Both are designed to test your ability to think critically, to organize and analyze arguments, and to clearly present your ideas in writing. In the Analytical Writing chapter of this book, you will find useful approaches to thinking through, organizing, and writing your responses. It is important to prepare for this section of the exam.

## The Two Analytical Writing Tasks at a Glance

### 1. Your Thoughts on an Issue

Time: 45 minutes

What you must do: Think; organize your thoughts; support your thoughts with examples and reasons; clearly express in writing your thoughts, reasons, and examples.

### 2. Your Critique of an Argument

Time: 30 minutes

What you must do: Read and understand an argument; assess for completeness and accuracy the evidence provided and the claims made in the argument; clearly express in writing your assessment, using examples and evidence from the argument to make your points.

You have 45 minutes to finish your response to the perspective, issue, or task. The question is presented as an opinion on a topic of general interest. You are asked to respond to this presentation of the issue, taking any viewpoint you desire. Your response is scored from zero to six, depending on how persuasively you present your views, use supporting examples, and offer evidence.

The second task asks you to analyze an argument that is presented to you. You must discuss the logical soundness of the argument itself, not whether you agree with the position taken. You have 30 minutes for this task, and it will also be scored from zero to six. Chapter 3, the Analytical Writing section of this book, contains all the information and strategies you need to do well on this part of the exam.

### What Is on the Verbal Test?

The GRE Verbal test is a 30-minute section consisting of 30 questions. The four types of verbal questions are: analogies, antonyms, sentence completions, and reading comprehension questions.

**Analogies** test your vocabulary and your ability to identify relationships between pairs of words and the concepts they represent. Simple techniques can help you divine the relationships, which are easily mastered with practice. You can learn and practice these techniques in Chapter 4 of this book.

The relationship of all **antonyms** is one of *opposition*. Basically, you must pick the answer choice (i.e., the word or concept) that is most nearly the opposite of the question word. Like the analogies section, this is also a test of vocabulary and reasoning skills.

**Sentence completion** questions test your ability to follow the logic of complicated, though incomplete, sentences. Often, the sentences are long, difficult to follow, and contain either one or two blanks. Though the vocabulary is sometimes challenging, these questions primarily test your ability to use sentence fragments as context clues from which to construct meaning. Chapter 4 of this book discusses these clues and how to identify and use them to make logical predictions and successfully complete the sentences.

## The Four Types of Verbal Questions at a Glance

1. *Antonyms* are opposites. You are given a word and asked to pick the word most nearly opposite it from the answer choices.
2. *Analogies* involve relationships between pairs of words. You are given a pair of words and asked to select the answer choice that contains a pair of words with a parallel relationship to the given words.
3. *Sentence Completion* questions are complex and usually contain either one or two blanks. You must construct a sentence's probable meaning using the sentence fragments as clues and then pick the answer that, when plugged into the sentence, conveys the correct meaning.
4. *Reading Comprehension* questions follow prose passages. You must correctly answer questions about the implications and shades of meaning in each passage.

**Reading comprehension** questions may be the most familiar types of questions on the GRE. You are presented with a passage taken from the humanities or the social or natural sciences. You are then asked questions that test your understanding of what is stated or implied in the passage. Often, successfully answering the questions hinges, in some way, on your knowledge of vocabulary in the passage.

If it seems as though vocabulary is the common thread running through these question types, that is because it is. There are specific strategies for each of the verbal question types, and those will be discussed in the upcoming Verbal chapter of this book—but no matter how extensive your vocabulary already is, now is the time to start expanding it.

### What Is in the Quantitative Section?

The good news for most test takers is that the GRE doesn't test you on college-level math. Most math skills tested come from arithmetic, algebra, and geometry—subjects you studied in secondary school. If you don't remember those skills, you should start brushing up on them right away; don't leave Chapter 5 to the last minute. This exam's twist on ordinary math is that you are asked to apply the basic skills within a larger context—that is, to reason quantitatively. Graduate programs want to know that you are comfortable working with numbers and using them to analyze the kinds of logical problems you are likely to encounter in your studies. For example, you will need to apply your quantitative skills to the analysis of data, including information presented in charts and tables. You will need to rapidly and accurately estimate more often than you will need to perform extensive calculations. That's a good thing, because you are not allowed to bring a calculator, or anything else, into the testing area. You won't really need a calculator, though. This section tests your ability to think about numbers and the things they represent and your ability to work logically with numbers; it does not test your number-crunching skills. There are 28 questions in the Quantitative test, and you will have 45 minutes to answer them. In Chapter 5 of this book, you will find a wealth of tips, strategies, and practice questions.

## The Kinds of Math in the Quantitative Section

- High school arithmetic
- High school geometry
- High school algebra
- High school data analysis (probability, frequency, measurement, data representation, and interpretation)

### Strategies for GRE Success

The most important strategies for doing well on the GRE General Test can be summed up as follows: Learn about the test and prepare for it. You already know those strategies; after all, you are reading this book. By following the instructions in this book, you will gain a head start on successful completion of the exam. When it comes to the GRE, knowledge truly is power.

Other strategies, however, may be less obvious to you. Many of these are discussed at length in the chapters that follow, including specific strategies that apply to individual sections of the test.

#### **ELIMINATE**

One strategy that cannot be overemphasized is the strategy of elimination. The wonderful thing about multiple-choice questions is that the answer is always right there in front of you. You only have to identify the correct one. Ah, but there's the problem—what if you are not sure which one is the right answer? Think about it this way: If you are given four answer choices and you guess randomly, you have a one-in-four chance of guessing correctly. If you realize that one of the answers is wrong, you have improved your chances to one-in-three. If you can eliminate two of the wrong answers, you have a 50% chance of answering correctly. Therefore, when you encounter a question to which you are not sure you know the answer, the first step is to read all the answer choices and eliminate the obviously incorrect ones. Even though this is not a pencil-and-paper test, you should use the scratch paper supplied by the test center to note when you have eliminated an answer. Sometimes, seeing the elimination process in this way helps you realize which answer is correct.

#### **GUESS**

Once you have ruled out as many incorrect choices as you can, you will have to guess. There is no penalty for guessing on the GRE. If you guess incorrectly, one point is deducted from your possible raw score. If you leave the question blank, one point is deducted from your possible raw score.

You can see that you should first eliminate and then guess on all questions you don't know. If you can rule out even one wrong answer, your odds of guessing correctly have improved. The more wrong answers you eliminate, the more points you rack up. In fact, on many GRE questions, you can fairly easily rule out all but two possible answers. That means you have a 50% chance of being right even if you don't know the correct answer. In short, elimination of wrong answers, followed by guessing, is an important strategy for the GRE.

**UNDERSTAND THE COMPUTER-ADAPTIVE NATURE OF THE EXAM**

Because of the computer-adaptive nature of the exam, you must answer each question as it appears on the screen. As you answer each question, the computer assesses your answer and then presents you with your next question, either a more difficult or an easier one, depending on whether you correctly answered the last one. That means you cannot go back to a previous question. You must answer each question as it is presented.

**DO NOT SKIP ANY QUESTIONS**

On questions you do not know, first eliminate wrong answers, then guess. The computer gives you two chances to finalize your answer. After you choose an answer and click on it, you click on the **Next** button. The computer then shows you an **Answer Confirm** button. When you click on that button, it is, as they say, “your final answer.” The computer will score the question and choose your next one.

It is vital that you work extremely carefully on the initial questions in each section. Those are the questions that place you within a general score range. Think of a CBT/CAT as a TV game show, with points instead of money. The question types are the categories, and each category has difficult questions, which are worth more points or money, and easy questions, which are worth less. Every contestant starts with the same amount of points; that is, the computer initially thinks of you as having an average score. If you answer a question correctly, your score goes up and your next question is more difficult, giving you the opportunity to earn more points (not money, unfortunately). Every time you answer incorrectly, the computer gives you an easier question, which is ultimately worth less than the previous one. Even if you answer the subsequent question correctly, you are in a lower range than you were before. It could take you several questions to work back up to your previous level of difficulty, where the questions are worth more. That means it pays to take your time and double-check the first ten or so questions in each section, so the computer will place you in a higher range before it starts fine-tuning your score.

**ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS**

In addition to not skipping any questions, it is important to answer all the questions in each section. Try not to get stuck on any one question. If you don't know an answer, eliminate as many wrong answers as you can, then guess and move on. When your onscreen clock says five minutes, it's time to answer the remaining questions as quickly as possible to answer them all. That's why you need to know how many questions are in each section (30 Verbal and 28 Quantitative). You may wish to practice answering questions, such as the ones found in Chapters 4 and 5, under time constraints matching the official exam conditions.

**How Does the Scoring Work?**

At the end of your CBT/CAT GRE General Test, you will have the opportunity to block your scores. If you choose to do so, your exam will never be scored, but ETS will report that you took the exam and chose not to have your scores reported. If you decide you want to see your scores for the test, you will be able to immediately see your unofficial scores for the Verbal and Quantitative sections only. However, once you choose to look at your scores, they will become part of your official GRE record. The Analytical Writing section will not be scored by the computer, so it takes longer to receive your scores. Within about two weeks, complete scores are mailed to you and to your chosen recipients.

For the Verbal and Quantitative sections, you will receive both raw scores and scaled scores. The raw scores reflect the number and difficulty level of questions you answered correctly. ETS then converts them to scaled scores, the scale being from 200 (an indicator that you showed up for the test) to 800 (meaning that you answered all questions correctly), reported in increments of ten points. You may recognize this scoring scale from the SAT. Also on your score report is the percentage of test takers who scored below you. For example, you might receive a raw score of 60, a scaled score of 640, and a “percentage below” of 91. That would mean you answered approximately three-fourths of the questions correctly, your scaled score is 640, and 91% of other test takers scored below you. At the end of this section is a chart showing potential raw scores and how they translate into both scaled scores and percentages.

The Analytical Writing questions are scored differently. Two professionally trained, unbiased readers read each of your two responses. Each reader scores each response on a scale of zero to six. The two readers’ scores for each response are then averaged, unless they differ by more than one point. If that is the case, a third reader will score the essay to resolve the differences. After each of your essays has been scored and averaged, your two essays’ scores are averaged and rounded up to the nearest half-point. You then receive that score as a single Analytical Writing score.

### **How Many Times May I Take the GRE General Test?**

You may retake the exam as often as five times in a 12-month period. All scores, other than those you choose to cancel before looking at them, will be retained for a five-year period, and all will be reported whenever you request your scores be sent out.

### **How to Use This Book**

Congratulations on having the foresight and motivation to prepare for the GRE. Those qualities are vital elements of success in any endeavor, including graduate school. Throughout this book, you will find strategies to help in your preparation for the exam. Chapter 2 is devoted to proven study methods and test-taking tips that will improve your scores.

The single most crucial thing you can do to prepare is to familiarize yourself thoroughly with the exam before the test day comes. This will enable you to accurately assess your strengths and address your weaknesses in all three sections of the test. When you register for the GRE, ETS will send you a CD-ROM, which contains the GRE POWERPREP. This software simulates actual testing conditions and uses the word processing program ETS has written for those who choose to compose their Analytical Writing essays on the computer instead of on paper. POWERPREP can also be downloaded from [www.GRE.org/pprepdwld.html](http://www.GRE.org/pprepdwld.html).

ETS also sells a book called *Practicing to Take the General Test, 10th Edition*. This book contains questions from actual past GRE General Test editions, as well as a review of the math concepts tested on the exam and sampling of Analytical Writing essays with reader comments, which yield insights into the way the essays are read and scored. It is a good idea to purchase and carefully study this book, using it for practice and looking for patterns of question types. You can purchase it online at [www.GRE.org/book.html](http://www.GRE.org/book.html). It will be worthwhile, in fact, to explore [www.GRE.org](http://www.GRE.org), the official website, for useful information. Among the gems you will find are two lists of topics, from which ETS selects the actual Analytical Writing prompts. Don’t get too