The GRE: What You Need to Know

Many grad schools around the world require you to take the GRE—but what is the GRE? And what do you absolutely have to know about it?

The GRE, officially known as The Graduate Record Examination General Test, is supposed to test your verbal, mathematical and analytical thinking skills. (Whether it actually does this very well is a matter of debate.)

Thousands of graduate programs around the world want to see your GRE scores before they will consider your application. That number has been shrinking in recent years. Some grad schools may not want to see your GRE scores. Others don't require it, but a good score can help you stand out from the crowd.

I first took the GRE back in 1991 (!) when it was still paper-based. It's changed a lot since then. Now, it's a fully computer-based test in most countries. More recently, students can take the GRE at home on their own computer because of COVID-19. Find more about that here.

Full disclosure: I've been teaching my own StudyProf GRE Prep Course since 2000. I've taught thousands of students one-on-one, in my private classes, and through Texas A&M University and the University of Houston.

Look here for my list of recommended GRE resources, including recommended GRE prep books, free practice tests, wordlists, and more.

Key GRE Facts

- The GRE is given as a Computer Adaptive Test (CAT). In a few countries, the GRE may still be paper-based.
- You can register for the GRE at ets.org/gre and take the test at one of many testing centers located throughout the US and around the world.
- You can sign up for a day and time that is convenient for you. Check with individual testing centers for GRE test date availability.
- As I write this, the cost for the GRE is $205 USD, but you can see the latest fee structure here.
- Many graduate schools use the GRE score in their admissions process, much like undergrad programs use the SAT or ACT.
- The test is administered from ETS (the company that makes the SAT and ACT) in 3 hours.
- It usually takes ETS fifteen days to get your official scores ready after you take the test. BUT you'll know your scores on the Verbal and Quantitative sections before you walk out the door on test day. That's known as your 'unofficial score'.
- Your 'official score' will not be available until your essays have been graded in about three weeks.
- Some schools will accept your unofficial scores. That means you don't need to wait three weeks after the GRE before applying to that grad school.
- The GRE has seven different sections divided between Written Analytical essays, Quantitative (math) questions, and Verbal questions.
- One of the seven sections—and you won't know which one—is an experimental section that won't count towards your score.
- The sections get harder or easier based on how well you do. For example, if you get most of the first math section right, then the next math section will be harder.

Scoring

The GRE is scored on a scale of 130 to 170 for the verbal and quantitative sections. 150 is a more or less average score, although it varies from year to year.

The writing section is scored on a 0 to 6 point scale in half-point increments. In the GRE written analytical, a 3.5 is just below average. Many schools don't look at your written analytical score or only consider it if you do very poorly in that section.

Some grad schools will lump your verbal and quantitative scores together. For example, "Our students should get at least a 305 on the GRE." Other schools may just look at percentile scores.

One thing we look at in-depth in my GRE prep course is how to find out exactly what your target grad school is looking at. Then we look at strategies for maximizing your chances with that school given your GRE scores.

GRE Structure

Your GRE will always start with the Analytical Writing portion which consists of two 30-minute essays. Then you will alternate between Verbal and Quantitative (math) sections.

There are 2 or 3 verbal sections and 2 or 3 math sections, with one section being an experimental section that doesn't count towards your score.

The whole GRE will take you about 3.5 hours. Here's the quick overview...

General Structure

The two essays always come first, and they are followed by either a math or a verbal section, followed by a ten-minute break.

Verbal and Quantitative sections come in random order, with a one-minute break between sections.

You will have either three verbal OR three quantitative sections. The extra section is an experimental section used to test out new questions.

You will not know which section is experimental (don't waste time trying to identify it), and it won't count towards your score.

2 GRE Verbal Sections

Each GRE Verbal section has around 25 questions and is 30 minutes long.

There are six **text-completion questions** in each section. These will have a sentence or two with one, two, or three blanks. You will have from three to five words or phrases to choose from for each blank. You must get them all correct to get any credit.

There are four **sentence-equivalence questions** in each GRE verbal section. These have a sentence with a blank and six possible words that might go in the blank. You pick the **two** words that would give the sentence a basically equivalent meaning.

Finally, you'll have around ten **reading-comprehension passages** with questions. The reading passages are from three to 15 sentences long with one to six questions over each passage.

150 is an average score for the GRE Verbal, but this can vary from year to year.

There are some simple, straightforward techniques that can quickly improve your GRE verbal scores. After that, big GRE scoring increases will come from learning a lot of new GRE vocabulary.

Don't make the mistake of simply memorizing a list of GRE vocabulary words with their dictionary definitions. In my experience, that takes a lot of time and rarely improves test-takers' scores.

There are methods for quickly and effectively learning large amounts of GRE vocabulary that really can improve your GRE verbal score significantly. I teach those methods in my class.

Two Quantitative (Math) Sections

Each GRE quantitative section has around 20 questions and is 35 minutes long. There are four different types of questions.

Quantitative Comparison questions will give you two different quantities and ask you to compare the two quantities to determine if one is larger than the other, if the two quantities are equal, or if the answer cannot be determined.

Multiple-choice questions are the same as the ones you are familiar with from grade school and high school: a question with five possible answer choices.

Multiple-answer questions. These look like multiple-choice questions but will have from 3 to ten different possible answers to choose from. Any or all of the answers may be correct, so you can choose more than one. I've seen the correct answer be all ten of the answer choices, I've also seen it be only one of the ten.

Numeric entry questions. On these, you will fill in a box with your own answer.

On the GRE Quantitative, a 152 is an approximate 50th percentile score, but this varies from year to year.

ETS gives you an on-screen calculator, but it isn't very good. It's the sort of calculator you might buy for $1 in the check-out line at Walmart. There are no higher-level keys, such as an exponent key, for example.

The GRE quantitative covers a very limited range of math concepts, including general number sense, algebra, geometry, and statistics. There is no calculus or trigonometry. Knowing exactly what math concepts are and are not tested on the GRE can save you a lot of study time and energy. In my course, we cover only the math concepts actually tested.

Two Written Analytical Essays

The GRE written analytical essays always come first on the GRE. There are two different types of essays.

In the **Analyze an Argument essay**, they will give you an argument—someone's letter to the editor, a paragraph out of a newspaper article, that sort of thing—and you will have 30 minutes to discuss where the author should have given more evidence or where they made unwarranted assumptions. You can see all the Argument essay prompts here.

The **Analysis of an Issue essay** is also 30 minutes long. ETS will give you a topic such as, "Censorship is rarely if ever justified," and you will have to build a logical, well-thought-out argument about why you agree or disagree. See all the Issue-essay prompts here.

A 3.5 is a slightly-below-average score for this section, and many grad schools don't actually look at this section. Others may only consider your scores if you really do poorly. Many other schools look at this section as carefully as the quantitative and verbal sections.

There are clear and easily-learned methods that I teach in my GRE prep class which can really boost your score in the written analytical section of the GRE. While the methods are easily learned, they do require time to practice and gain mastery. Here's how to prep...

Prep for the GRE

Some types of GRE prep pay off much more than others in a shorter amount of time. Knowing which areas of study will yield the biggest GRE score improvements can help you get the most out of your prep time.

I often have students in my prep course who are taking the GRE only a few days after my class. Others may be many months out from their GRE test date. What's a reasonable amount of time to spend prepping for the GRE?

Generally, plan on spending 40 to 60 hours prepping for the test if you want to turn in your best performance. However, there are certain things you can do to really maximize your score even with a few hours of prep.

One thing I teach in my GRE prep course that students consistently report has a huge impact on their GRE scores is learning how to handle test anxiety. There are powerful, easy-to-master methods for turning off test anxiety so you can turn in your best performance on the GRE. That's really worth working on.

Other concepts, such as learning the techniques for each of the different GRE verbal question types and memorizing certain key math concepts and formulas, are quick to master and give instant GRE score increases.

Still other areas of study—such as the details of each different math concept you're likely to see on the GRE and memorizing vocabulary—can take a longer time to study. However, they will give big payoffs on that final GRE score.

Finally, some areas of study, such as GRE reading comprehension, are almost not worth studying. Many days of study in some of these areas will give only minimal score increases. One thing I do in my class is help students strategize about where to spend their time prepping for the GRE, so they can get the most bang for their buck.

Key Contacts

- For the latest information and news and to sign up for the actual GRE test go to the ETS website.
- To sign up for a weekend GRE prep class or one-on-one tutoring taught via Zoom, go here.

Learn More About StudyProf GRE Prep

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