

A Few Quick and Dirty Tips for ~~Cramming~~ Studying for the GRE

The GRE (Graduate Record Examination) General Test is *the* standardized test for PhD admissions. It's about five hours long, administered on the computer, and has Verbal Reasoning (reading comprehension), Quantitative Reasoning (math), and Analytical Writing (two essays) sections. It also costs over \$200, so you'll want to try your best to take it only once. Here are my tips for hitting a high score the first time around.

- Mimic your test conditions as closely as possible.
 - The GRE is on the computer, which means that you won't be able to scribble on the page or mark up passages like you might be used to for paper exams. I highly suggest taking online exams or propping your book up while practicing—even for practice problems outside of mock exams.
 - You are given limited amounts of scrap paper at a time. The scrap paper is about twice the size of a US letter sheet, folded hamburger style, with a bit of text on the front. If you want a new piece of scrap paper, you have to get your test administrator's attention, wait for them to walk over, ask for a new piece, wait for them to go get it, wait for them to come back, and then trade your old piece for the new one. This is distracting and time consuming. Practice with limited amounts of scrap paper and ask for a new sheet at the beginning of every section, just to be safe.
 - You are given one pencil at a time. You are not allowed to use your own. The pencil is one of those standard no. 2 pencils, the kind that gets dull quickly if you write too much or with too much pressure. If you are used to using mechanical pencils, you may be taking the instant *click click* for granted. When your pencil gets dull, you need to ask to trade it for a new one—take some time to get used to

old-school pencils and ask for a new pencil at the beginning of every section, just like the scrap paper.

- Focus on the Quantitative Reasoning section.
 - Apparently, the QR section is the most important in CS. Makes sense.
 - The QR section is also pure *evil*. It is designed to trick you. If you forget to consider negative numbers, you'll get half the questions wrong. CONSTANT VIGILANCE!
 - The calculator provided to you is one of the basic electronic ones *on the computer*. No handy dandy scientific calculator for you. This can make calculations very time consuming—time to brush up on basic math!
 - To prepare for the QR section, grab a GRE prep book and do as many practice problems as you can. You can time yourself if you want—the official QR section gives 35 minutes for 20 questions, which averages 1:45 per question. Don't forget to mimic test conditions, even for practice problems.
- YOLO the Verbal Reasoning section.
 - Truly, I don't know what to say about this section. I don't know how to prepare for it. Thankfully, the VR section is less important for CS graduate admissions.
 - Most of the questions will ask you to read a passage and answer some questions about it.
 - The other questions revolve around knowing some intense vocabulary. These vocabulary words are even more intense than SAT vocabulary words, I'm afraid. I don't recommend spending too much time on GRE vocab—the marginal return is just too low. Go on Quizlet and master a few of those GRE vocab decks and hope for the best.
- Write well-structured, not well-written, essays on the Analytical Writing section.
 - You will write two essays for the Analytical Writing section: Analyze

an Issue and Analyze an Argument. These do not need to be *good* essays; you don't need dynamic prose or great transitions or diverse vocabulary. They just need to have a clear, coherent message (avoid long sentences!) and strong structure.

- You don't need to dedicate too much time to practicing the essay section. Maybe just go through a couple practice rounds to get used to the format and typing instead of handwriting.
- Analyze an Issue
 - This is the classic persuasive essay. You will be given a prompt (one of mine had something to do with whether fame is beneficial or detrimental for success). You will need to respond with your stance (I said that fame is beneficial when it is handled appropriately but can become detrimental in bad circumstances) and provide examples that support your opinion (I talked about a famous research professor, Shawn Mendes, and the James Charles/Tati feud that my friends kept gossiping about at the time).
 - Note that you don't actually need to believe in your stance—if one opinion seems easier to write about, then go for it. Don't get too tangled up in what you truly believe.
 - You also don't have to have the strongest examples ever. I don't actually follow the makeup artist scene on social media, and I don't actually care that much about what happened between James Charles and Tati. This example did, however, immediately pop into my head when I read this prompt, and I didn't bother wasting time trying to think of a different idea.
 - Make sure to address a counterexample. By talking about the research professor and Shawn Mendes, I was trying to show that fame helps distribute ideas and sell products. Being so famous does come with a cost, which is what I was addressing with the last example.
- Analyze an Argument

- The idea for this style of essay was known to me when I was taking the GRE. You'll be given some sort of "memo." It will be some sort of announcement from the leader of a company or organization that discusses a situation and proposes some type of action. You need to pick out every piece of the argument and discuss its validity. You might be used to the five-paragraph model of writing an essay—throw that away for this one. This will be more like an introductory paragraph followed by several mini paragraphs and a conclusion.
- One prompt I saw was a memo from the owner of a video rental store (RIP Blockbuster). He wanted to increase profits so he proposed increasing the number of rom-com and action movies available for rent. The real test will give more details than this, but this is already enough to show you what kinds of ideas the readers are looking for.
 1. Increasing the number of rom-com and action movies will increase profits only if the renters like these genres. The owner should confirm which genres are the most popular at his store before making a decision.
 2. If he buys more movies and no one rents them, these movies will actually become a cost to the store.
 3. There are two ways to increase profit: increase revenue or decrease cost (or both). The owner should see if there are any costs he can cut before spending any more money.
- Try to find as many reasoning flaws as possible and write a short paragraph about each. Again, the essay does not have to be well-written, just well-structured. This mostly a bulletpoint list without the bulletpoints.