

## Summary

- Different programs value the essay section in different ways. Check with your program to see how important the essays are.
- Understand the criteria ETS uses when judging your essay. Organization, examples, and language use are important. Perfect grammar and spelling less so.
- On the GRE, longer essays tend to get better scores, so strive to write as much as you can for each essay.
- Make sure you understand the differences in the assignments for the Issue essay and the Argument essay.
- Issue essays ask for your opinion on a topic while argument essays expect you to critique the logic of an argument. The ways in which you're asked to do each of these tasks will vary, so make sure you read each set of directions carefully.
- The word processor ETS provides has only the most basic functions. You can delete, copy, and paste text, but not much more.

## Chapter 14 The Issue Essay

The Issue essay of the GRE requires you to present your opinion on the provided topic. This chapter will show you the steps to take in order to write a clear, coherent essay in the limited time provided. You'll learn exactly what sort of things the ETS graders are looking for when they evaluate your essay so you'll know just what to do on test day.

You have to know what you want your essay to say before you can start writing.

## THREE BASIC STEPS

Because you don't have a lot of time to write the essays, you'll need to have a pretty good idea of how you're going to attack them as soon as you sit down at the computer on test day. Our approach to the essays involves three steps. These are:

1. **Think.** Before you start writing, take a moment to brainstorm some thoughts about the topic.
2. **Organize.** Take the ideas you've come up with and fit them into the assignment for the prompt.
3. **Write.** Once you've completed the first two steps, the final step should be a snap.

Thirty minutes is not a lot of time to write an essay, so you have to get it right the first time out. While ETS advises you to leave enough time to proofread and edit your essay, it simply isn't feasible to expect to make any significant changes to your essay during the final minutes of the section. Furthermore, if you get halfway through your essay and realize you're stuck or you're not saying what you need to say, you'll be hard pressed to fix your essay in the time you have left.

It is essential, therefore, to make sure you spend time planning your essay before you start writing. You have to figure out what it is you want to say before you begin; otherwise, you run the risk of writing an incoherent, rambling essay. The first two steps are actually more important to a successful GRE essay than the final step; by spending a little time planning your essay, the actual writing part should be relatively painless.

The keys to the essay: Think, Organize, Write.

Let's start our discussion of the Issue essay by looking at a typical prompt.

## The Prompt

"True beauty is found not in the exceptional but in the commonplace."  
Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your essay, consider instances in which the statement does and does not hold true.

The prompts are supposed to get you thinking about areas of "general interest," whatever that means. A better way of thinking about the prompt is to look at it as agree/disagree- or pro/con-type statement. Your task in the essay will be to look at both sides of the issue, the pro and the con side, and take a position on the statement. Let's look at how to do that.

## STEP 1: THINK

"Think" is a pretty broad command, so we need to clarify this step in order to make it more useful. Specifically, we want you to think about three things:

1. **Key Terms.** What are the key words or phrases in the prompt? Do the terms need clarifying before you can properly deal with them in the essay?
2. **Opposite Side.** What would the converse of the statement be?
3. **Examples.** What are some examples that would support the statement? What are some examples that would support the opposite statement?

Let's work through these steps with our sample prompt.

## Key Terms

When preparing your essay, you first want to look more closely at the key terms in the prompt. Do they need to be clarified? Are there multiple ways of interpreting the words? In order to make your essay as focused as possible, you might need to limit the key terms to a specific definition or interpretation. If the key terms in the prompt seem pretty straightforward, you still want to note them. By repeatedly returning to these terms in your essay, you'll convey the impression that your essay is strongly organized and on topic.

For the sample prompt above, write down the key terms:

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For this prompt, the key terms are *beauty*, *true*, *exceptional*, and *commonplace*. We need to think about how we're going to use these terms in our essay. For example, what is *true beauty*? Do we want that to mean just natural beauty or can we consider man-made objects? As for the word *beauty*, do we want to limit our discussion to artistic beauty such as paintings and sculptures, or should we consider poems and literature as well? Should we only discuss natural beauty, such as stars and flowers, or should we consider personal beauty as well, such as models and flowers? As you can see, we could write a lot on this topic, if we had the time. But we don't, so it's important to focus. By defining our key terms, we make the essay a lot more manageable and easier to write in a short amount of time. For this essay, let's include both natural objects and manmade artistic feats, but leave out personal beauty.

Using key terms from the prompt throughout your essay contributes to its overall coherence.

## Opposite Side

In order to score well on the Issue essay, you'll have to consider both sides of the prompt. ETS is looking for more than a straightforward "I agree and here's why" or "I disagree and here's why" essay. Rather, the graders want to see you consider both sides of the issue and then defend your position. Take a brief moment to look at the sample prompt, and then write down the converse of the statement.

For this prompt, the opposite side of the argument would be something along the lines of "True beauty is found not in the commonplace, but the exceptional." Note that ETS doesn't have a preference for the pro or con side. So if you find the opposite of the statement more convincing, that's fine. As long as you can support your position with some relevant examples, it doesn't matter what position you take on the prompt. This brings us to the final part of step one—brainstorming examples.

## Examples

In many ways, the examples will be the most important part of your essay. Without strong, relevant examples you cannot expect to achieve a high score on the Issue essay. As the instructions state, you should support your position with examples drawn from your reading, experience, observation, and academic studies. In general, the more specific your examples are, the better your essay score. And examples from history, literature, or current events are better than personal observations or experiences. Imagine yourself as an ETS grader (a terrible thought, we know). Which sentence would you respond more favorably to?

*"Few observers would doubt the awesome beauty of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, a work of art produced by the great Renaissance artist Michelangelo."*

*"Few observers would doubt the awesome beauty of the various paintings they see in museums, works of art produced by great artists."*

Both sentences essentially say the same thing and use practically the same words. But the first sentence would be graded more favorably by an ETS grader because of the specificity of the example.

Take a moment to jot down some examples for the previous prompt. Make sure you come up with examples for both the original statement and its opposite.

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Now take a moment to look over your examples. Are they specific? Are they relevant to the topic? Do they support a position on the topic? The strength of your examples will determine the strength of your argument. It's hard to write a convincing paper with weak examples. Here are some examples that might work for our sample topic, both weaker and stronger:

### Okay Example

paintings, artwork  
buildings, churches  
flowers, natural wonders

### Better Example

Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*  
Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris  
Niagara Falls

Good examples are relevant to the topic and contain specific details.

In each case, the better example is the more specific, more detailed example. Also note that we've avoided any personal examples. While you certainly may feel that your boyfriend or girlfriend is the most beautiful person in the world, that sort of personal example won't resonate with an ETS grader nearly as well as a more academic or global example. Use personal examples only when specifically instructed to by the prompt or as a last resort.

## STEP 2: ORGANIZE

Once you've identified the key terms, considered the opposite side of the issue, and generated some examples, it's time to organize your thoughts. Basically, you'll want to do the following:

1. **Separate Your Examples.** How many of your examples support the pro side and how many support the con side? Divide your examples up and see which side has more support.
2. **Write Your Thesis Statement.** After evaluating the strength of your examples, decide what position you will take in your essay, and then write your thesis. Your thesis is the main point that you want your essay to express.

Let's continue the process on the sample prompt.

Avoid hypothetical examples—the more specific your example is, the better

It doesn't matter what side of the issue you take on the GRE.

## Separate Your Examples

Do this before you decide on your thesis statement. Even though you might have a strong preference for one position on the issue, you might notice that the examples you brainstormed tend to support the other side of the issue. Don't expend more time trying to think of examples to support your preconceptions; just write your essay supporting the other side! There is no right or wrong response. All that matters is being able to write a strong, coherent essay in a very limited time. Your personal views or beliefs are unimportant to the ETS graders. If we continue with the examples we used earlier, they would probably break down like this:

**Pro**  
natural wonders

**Con**  
*Mona Lisa*  
Notre Dame

Based on some of the examples we've come up with, it looks like we'd be better off supporting the idea that "True beauty is found not in the commonplace, but in the exceptional." While natural wonders like sunsets and flowers are pretty commonplace, we've come up with a lot more exceptional examples. And it looks like we could even argue that it is the exceptional natural wonders, such as Niagara Falls, that are truly beautiful.

## Write Your Thesis Statement

Now comes the culmination of all of our work. What point do we want to make about the topic? Write it down here:

Our thesis should probably be something along the lines of this: "While certain commonplace natural objects are examples of beauty, true beauty is most often found in rare, exceptional cases."

Now that we have figured out what we want to say, we can focus on proving why we believe it. But remember, only after working through these steps are we truly ready to write!

# Practice: Steps 1 and 2

Work through steps one and two on the following Issue essay prompts below.

## PROMPT 1

"Genius is nothing more than another term for obsession."

Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider instances in which the statement is true as well as those in which the statement is false.

On your scratch paper, write the (1) Key Terms, (2) Opposite Side, (3) Examples, and (4) Thesis.

## PROMPT 2

"The proper role of education is to teach facts, not morals."

Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider cases in which education teaches facts as well as those in which morals are taught.

On your scratch paper, write the (1) Key Terms, (2) Opposite Side, (3) Examples, and (4) Thesis.

## Practice: Sample Responses

Obviously, your examples and thesis statements will differ, but these sample responses will give you a good indication of what ETS is looking for.

### Prompt 1

**Key Terms:** Genius and obsession. Are we talking about artistic genius? Or scientific genius? What does the word *obsession* entail? Is it just another word for being crazy?

**Opposite Side:** “Genius is not just another term for obsession.”

**Examples:** Isaac Newton, who once stuck pins into his own eyes in order to better understand optics; Vincent Van Gogh, who cut off part of his own ear under the stresses of his work; Thomas Edison, who patented over 1,300 different inventions

**Thesis:** “Many geniuses in both the artistic and scientific fields do demonstrate a form of obsession or mental unbalance.”

### Prompt 2

**Key Terms:** What sort of education are we referring to—elementary school, college, business school? What are morals? Are we considering religious viewpoints or just ethical standards?

**Opposite Side:** “Education should teach morals.”

**Examples:** Law schools, business schools, and medical schools all teach proper ethics for their professions; Trade schools and vocational schools tend to teach only facts; Students can get moral training at home or in a religious institution

**Thesis:** “Many educational institutions have an obligation to teach morals as well as facts.”

## STEP 3: WRITE

Now that we know how to prepare for our Issue essay, we can write it. In this section, we’ll discuss various templates for essays and show you how you can preconstruct certain portions of your essay. Before we do that though, let’s revisit what the readers are looking for from your writing.

### What the Readers Want to See

The essay readers will be looking for four characteristics as they skim your Analysis of an Issue essay (at the speed of light). According to ETS, an outstanding essay:

- considers the complexities of the issue
- supports the position with relevant examples
- is clearly well organized
- demonstrates superior facility with the conventions of standard written English, but still with minor flaws.

To put it more simply, the readers are looking for good organization, good supporting examples for whatever position you’ve taken, and reasonably good use of the English language. We’ve hopefully taken care of the first two parts, so now we’ll deal with the next two.

## Essay Essentials

As you learned in sixth-grade composition class, a basic essay has three parts: an introduction, some body paragraphs, and a conclusion. These three things are exactly what ETS wants to see in your Analysis of an Issue essay. Each of these parts has a specific role to play.

1. The **Introduction** should introduce the topic of the essay, discuss the issues surrounding it, and present the essay’s thesis.
2. The **Body Paragraphs** should use examples to support the thesis of the essay.
3. The **Conclusion** should summarize the major points of the issue, reiterate the thesis and perhaps consider its implications.

Basically, if you try to think of each paragraph as having a specific job to do, you can pretty much preconstruct each type of paragraph and then fill in the specific details on test day.

## Preconstruction: The Introduction

For the Issue essay, a good introduction accomplishes the following tasks:

A good introduction:

1. Clearly establishes the topic of the paper
2. Previews both sides of the issue at hand
3. Presents a clear thesis

Let’s look at each of these tasks in detail and discuss different ways to accomplish the goals of the introductory paragraph.

## Establish the Topic

We want the reader to know what issue the essay is going to talk about. Even though the grader will see the prompt you’re writing about, he or she should be able to figure out the prompt just from reading the introduction of your essay. There are a few different ways you can quickly establish the topic, so let’s return to our original prompt and preconstruct some approaches.

The basic structure of an essay includes an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion.

Don’t just restate the prompt! Come up with a strong “hook” for the beginning of your essay.

Here, once again, is our prompt:

"True beauty is found not in the exceptional but in the commonplace."  
Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your essay, consider instances in which the statement does and does not hold true.

One of the worst ways of establishing the topic is to merely quote the prompt. ETS graders look upon this tactic with disdain, so let's find other ways of starting our essay.

### Approach #1: Rhetorical Questions

This is a tried-and-true way of introducing your topic. Instead of simply quoting or paraphrasing the prompt, turn it into a rhetorical question. Here are a few samples:

*Where does true beauty lie, in the exceptional or in the commonplace?*

*Do we find the exceptional more beautiful or the commonplace?*

*Can we only find beauty in rare, exceptional instances or does it truly lie all around us?*

It is immediately clear what topic the essay will explore, from each of these examples of introductory sentences. See if you can come up with a rhetorical question for either this topic or one from the previous drill.

### Approach #2: Famous Quotations

Another classic approach to beginning an essay is to use either a well-known saying or a famous quote from someone. Many of the GRE topics are fairly bland, so even if you can't think of a famous quote, there are usually some classic aphorisms you use. Here's what we mean:

*"Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty," or so said the romantic poet John Keats.*

*A common saying is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder.*

Obviously, this type of introduction can be tough to do if something doesn't pop into your head right away. Try to come up with a quote or common saying for this topic or one from the drill.

### Approach #3: Anecdote

An anecdote is a brief story. Oftentimes you can grab your reader's attention and introduce the topic with a good anecdote. For example:

*It is said that Cezanne, the famed French painter, was so concerned with the beauty of his paintings that he would destroy any of his works that he felt was flawed.*

*The Romantic poet John Keats was so struck by the beauty of Chapman's translation of Homer's work that he wrote a poem about it.*

When using an anecdote you might have to write a sentence or two explaining the relevance of your story. Try out an anecdote for this topic or one of the drill topics.

### Approach #4: Fact/Statistic

For some topics, it might be appropriate to start your essay by stating a fact or statistic. ETS graders aren't allowed to penalize you for factual mistakes and they certainly aren't going to fact-check your essay. So don't be afraid if your fact isn't 100 percent accurate. Here's an illustration:

*A recent scientific study showed that the faces that people find the most beautiful are those that are the most symmetrical.*

*Psychologists have demonstrated that people's responses to certain phenomena are based on certain innate mechanisms in the brain.*

Give this approach a shot, using this topic or one from the drill.

### Approach #5: Definition

One way you may wish to start your essay is by defining one of the key terms from the prompt. For example:

*Beauty, by definition, is that which moves us or impacts us significantly.*

*The "exceptional" typically refers to those things that stand out, which is also a plausible definition for beauty.*

The advantage to this approach is that you already spent some time thinking along these lines when you were planning your essay. Come up with a sample introductory sentence for this topic or one of the drill topics.

A good opening line is great to have, but if you're stuck, don't spend an excessive amount of time trying to come up with something clever.

## Preview the Issue

Once you've told the reader what the topic is, your next task is to inform the reader of the issues at hand. You want to briefly touch on both sides of the debate, explaining the pros and cons of the prompt. A good way to accomplish this is to make use of strong trigger words—words like *but*, *despite*, *while*, and *although*. Here are some examples.

*While some people can find beauty in the most common of places, true beauty is only found in the exceptional.*

*Some would argue that beauty is found everywhere, from the flowers to the stars, but others would state that true beauty is found only in rare, special instances.*

*Despite the assertions of many that beauty is everywhere, true beauty is found only in exceptional cases.*

*Although one might argue that many commonplace things are beautiful, it is the exceptional things that possess true beauty.*

*There can be no doubt that some of the world's most common things are beautiful. And yet, it is often the exceptional objects that possess true beauty.*

Practice writing sentences that address both sides of the issue. Use the sample topic or one from the drill.

## Present the Thesis

Your final task in the introduction is to present the thesis. Some writers prefer to avoid the first person, refusing to use sentences such as “I believe...” or “I feel...” However, GRE graders will not penalize you for use of the first person. A more important consideration when writing your thesis is giving the reader some indication why you hold your particular position. ETS graders want to see that you've thought about and analyzed the issue. Here are some examples of thesis statements.

*I believe that beauty is truly found in the exceptional, not the commonplace, because if common things were beautiful, the very word would lose its meaning.*

*In my view, beauty is found in the exceptional, not the commonplace. This is because only exceptional things really stand out as special in our minds.*

*It is clear that true beauty is not to be found in the commonplace but in the exceptional. On closer inspection, even so-called common objects that people consider beautiful are actually exceptional.*

*After weighing the evidence, it is certain that beauty is the province of the exceptional, not the commonplace. People find true beauty in things that they rarely experience, not the things they experience every day.*

For each thesis, you can see that the author is also giving some justification for the viewpoint. This justification will be of course explored more thoroughly in the body paragraphs, but it's good to give the reader a preview of how your essay will take shape. Try writing thesis statements for some of the sample prompts.

## Preconstruction: Body Paragraphs

A body paragraph should do the following:

Good body paragraphs:

1. Use a good transition/topic sentence
2. Present an example
3. Explain how the example supports the thesis

Body paragraphs are a little harder to preconstruct because they are the most specific part of the essay. Still, there are some handy tips for creating body paragraphs that an ETS grader will love.

## Transition/Topic Sentence

ETS graders love organized essays that flow well. The best way to write an essay like this is to use strong topic sentences and good transitions for each of your body paragraphs. Your topic sentence should serve as a gentle reminder to the reader of what the thesis of the essay is. For example:

*One example of beauty found in the exceptional is Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa.*

A good thesis tells the reader exactly what your position is and why.

*A second instance in which true beauty lies not in the commonplace but in the exceptional is Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.*

Of course, you might want to avoid using simple transitions like “the first example,” and “the second example.” You can make your writing stronger by leading with the example and making the transition a little more subtle, like so:

*Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa is surely one of the most exceptional, and beautiful, paintings ever created.*

*Consider the beauty of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, a building that is in no way commonplace.*

Or to get even fancier, refer to the previous example in your transition sentence:

*Like da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is an exceptional, and exceptionally beautiful, object.*

The important point is that each sentence introduces the example and reminds the reader of the purpose of the example, which in this case is to support the notion of beauty as exceptional. In the next few sentences, you’ll provide details about your example. It’s important that you remember to link the example to your thesis.

## Explain How Your Example Supports Your Thesis

On the GRE essays, don’t get so caught up in providing details for your example that you forget to explain to the reader how or why your example helps your thesis. The purpose of the Issue essay is not to just list out some examples; the purpose is to develop and support a position on the issue. Here’s an example of a body paragraph that doesn’t quite fulfill that goal:

*Like da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is an exceptional, and exceptionally beautiful, object. Notre Dame is a stunning example of gothic architecture, famous for the flying buttresses that adorn the sides of the building. The cathedral also has rows and rows of beautiful sculptures recessed into the walls, as well as a gorgeous central stained-glass window. These features make Notre Dame one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the world.*

The writer here did a good job of providing specific details about the example, which ETS graders love. However, the reader failed to explain why Notre Dame supports the view that true beauty is exceptional, not commonplace. Let’s fix that:

*Like da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is an exceptional, and exceptionally beautiful, object. Churches and cathedrals line the streets of most major cities in Western Europe, but few possess the renown of Notre Dame. Notre Dame is a stunning example of gothic architecture, famous for the flying buttresses that adorn the sides of the building. The cathedral also has rows and rows of beautiful sculptures recessed into the walls, as well as a gorgeous central stained-glass window. These features make Notre Dame one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the world. Compared to a common church or cathedral, Notre Dame is truly awe-inspiring; Victor Hugo used the building as the backdrop for his magnificent book *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and thousands of tourists travel untold miles to view the cathedral. That sort of beauty is not possessed by just any church on the corner.*

This is a stronger body paragraph because it is more explicit in its discussion of the thesis. The author notes that churches and cathedrals are fairly common, but then argues that Notre Dame stands out as an exceptional cathedral. The author concludes the paragraph by showing how Notre Dame is more beautiful than any typical church. Just as a reader should be able to figure out what the topic of the paper is from the introduction, a reader should be able to figure out the thesis from each paragraph.

Write a body paragraph for one of the examples for this sample topic, or one of your examples from the practice. Make sure you have a good topic/transition sentence, specific details for the example, and an explanation of how or why the example is relevant to the thesis.

## Preconstruction: Conclusion Paragraphs

Your essay should always have a conclusion, for two reasons. First, a conclusion paragraph is evidence of good organization. It shows the reader that you knew exactly what points you wanted to make, you made them, and now you’re ending the essay. And second, an essay that lacks a conclusion seems incomplete, almost as if your writing abruptly ends before it should. This can give the grader a negative impression of your essay. Fortunately, conclusion paragraphs are easy to write. A good conclusion basically:

A good conclusion:

1. Alerts the reader that the essay is ending
2. Summarizes the main points of the essay

Make sure your essay has a conclusion.

Don’t just tell the grader about the example; tell the grader why the example is relevant to your thesis.



Some test takers even prefer to write their introduction and conclusion first and then fill in the body paragraphs. This strategy has the advantage of making your essay seem complete even if you happen to run out of time writing the body paragraphs.

## Alert the Reader

Conclusion paragraphs have their own topic/transition sentences, which generally should contain a word or phrase that tells the reader he or she is reaching the end. Here are some examples:

*In conclusion, it's clear that true beauty is found not in the commonplace, but the exceptional.*

*Ultimately, beauty lies in the exceptional, not the commonplace.*

*As the bulk of the evidence shows, the exceptional, not the commonplace, possesses true beauty.*

*Clearly, true beauty is found in exceptional things, not in commonplace ones.*

*The examples above all support the idea that we find true beauty in exceptional cases, not in commonplace ones.*

Write some conclusion sentences for this topic or a sample topic from the sample prompts.

## Summarize Main Points

Your conclusion should also summarize the main points of the essay, meaning that it should mention the thesis and how the examples support it. Additionally, you can briefly consider the implications of the thesis. Here are some sample conclusions:

*In conclusion, it's clear that true beauty is found not in the commonplace, but the exceptional. The Mona Lisa and Notre Dame Cathedral are both exceptional examples of fairly commonplace things and it is these exceptions that are noted as truly beautiful. If anything, the commonplace only serves as a contrast to what true beauty really is.*

*Ultimately, beauty lies in the exceptional, not the commonplace. While paintings and churches are fairly commonplace, only a small few of them, such as the Mona Lisa or Notre Dame, truly reach the heights of beauty. It is in these exceptions that we find real beauty.*

*The examples above all support the idea that we find true beauty in exceptional cases, not in commonplace ones. Common things may seem at first glance to be beautiful, but once we compare these commonplace examples to the truly exceptional ones, we see that the exceptional ones are truly beautiful.*

Try your hand at constructing a conclusion paragraph, once again using this topic or one from the sample prompts.

## Putting It All Together

Read through this sample essay that's based on the basic five-paragraph model. Then you'll have the chance to try writing a similar essay for a different prompt.

"True beauty is found not in the exceptional but in the commonplace."  
Write an essay in which you take a position on the statement above. In developing and supporting your essay, consider instances in which the statement does and does not hold true.

*Beauty, by definition, is that which moves us or impacts us significantly. Some would argue that beauty is found everywhere, from the flowers to the stars. But others would state that true beauty is found only in rare, special instances. After weighing the evidence, it is certain that beauty is the province of the exceptional, not the commonplace. People are moved most by things that they rarely experience, not the things they experience every day.*

*Those that would argue that true beauty is everywhere might point to the beauty of a flower, or the starlit night. These experiences are certainly common, but do they show that true beauty is commonplace? Flowers might be considered beautiful, but how often does a person stop to look at or appreciate every flower? Flowers are so common that in many cases, they are ignored or viewed as nothing special. However, on those rare occasions—exceptional occasions, one might say—when we want to commemorate an event or express emotion, we notice the beauty of flowers. Thus, it is not the commonplace flower that strikes us as beautiful, but the exceptional situations themselves that move us to appreciate the flower.*

*Now consider the exceptional. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa is surely one of the most exceptional, and beautiful, paintings ever created. Few people who view the painting are not moved by the sheer beauty of it, and the Mona Lisa is instantly recognized as a masterpiece of art. And yet, there have been literally millions of paintings produced in human history. Is every single one of them beautiful? Does every one of those paintings have the impact that da Vinci's does? Of course not. In order to find beauty, we must separate the exceptional cases from the common ones. True beauty is such because it stands out from the masses of the average and pedestrian.*

*Like da Vinci's Mona Lisa, the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris is an exceptional, and exceptionally beautiful, object. Churches and cathedrals line the streets of most major cities in Western Europe, but few possess the renown of Notre Dame, one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the world. Compared to a common church or cathedral, Notre Dame is truly awe-inspiring; Victor Hugo used the building as the backdrop for his magnificent book *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and thousands of tourists travel untold miles to view the cathedral. That sort of beauty is not possessed by just any church on the corner.*

*In conclusion, it's clear that true beauty is found not in the commonplace, but the exceptional. The Mona Lisa and Notre Dame Cathedral are both exceptional examples of fairly commonplace things and it is these exceptions that are noted as truly beautiful. If anything, the commonplace only serves as a contrast so that we can understand what true beauty really is.*

## Your Turn

Try writing a similar essay for the prompt that follows this paragraph. Make sure you consider the opposing side of the argument. Devote a paragraph to looking at an example for the other side of the issue, but make sure you indicate to the reader that there is a flaw in the example or that the example is less than convincing. Set a timer for 30 minutes to practice GRE time constraints.

"People most respect the powerful not when they exercise their power, but when they refrain from exercising it."

Write an essay in which you develop and support a position on the statement above. In writing your essay, you should consider both when the statement may be true and when it may be false.

## How to Score Your Essay

Now it's time to put on your essay-scoring hat and prepare to grade your own essay. If you're lucky enough to have a friend who is also preparing for the GRE, you could switch essays and grade each other's like you used to do in sixth grade. You'll need to be objective during this process. Remember, the only way to improve is to honestly assess your weaknesses and systematically eliminate them.

Set a timer for two minutes. Read the essay carefully but quickly, so that you do not exceed the two minutes on the timer.

Now ask yourself the following questions about the essay:

1. Overall, did it make sense?
2. Did you address the topic directly?
3. Did you address the topic thoroughly?
4. Did your introduction paragraph repeat the issue to establish the topic of the essay?
5. Did you consider both sides of the issue?
6. Did your examples make sense?
7. Did you flesh out your examples with details?
8. Did you explain how your examples supported your thesis?
9. Did your essay have a strong concluding paragraph?
10. Was your essay well organized, using transitions and topic sentences?
11. Did you use language that made the organization of the essay obvious?
12. Did you use correct grammar, spelling, and language, for the most part?

If you could answer "yes" to all or almost all of these questions, congratulations! Your essay would probably receive a score in the 5–6 range. If you continue to practice, and write an essay of similar quality on the real Analysis of an Issue section of the real test, you should score very well.

If you answered "yes" to fewer than 12 of the questions, you have room for improvement. Fortunately, you also know which areas you need to strengthen as you continue to practice.

If you answered "yes" to fewer than 6 of the questions, your essay would probably not score very well on a real GRE. An essay of this quality would not help you in the admissions process and could raise some red flags in the minds of the admissions people. You need to continue to practice, focusing on the areas of weakness that you discovered during this scoring process.

## Another Sample Response

Take a look at a high scoring response to the prompt you just practiced on. Your essay might look different and that's fine. This is just one of many ways to successfully complete the Issue essay assignment.

"The powerful are most respected not when they exercise their power, but when they refrain from exercising it."

Write an essay in which you develop and support a position on the statement above. In writing your essay, you should consider both when the statement may be true and when it may be false.

*What aspect of power engenders the greatest respect? Some would argue that power inspires respect only by its ability to change things or bring about results. This camp respects the powerful only when they demonstrate their power by raising a massive army or bestowing charity on the less fortunate. Others believe that the true measure of power lies not in what it is used for, but in how it is restrained. These people believe that people most respect the powerful when they choose not to use their power, such as granting clemency to a criminal on death row or allowing critics of the government to speak out.*

*Consider first the respect people hold for the exercise of power. One of the mightiest displays of power is the ability to protect and safeguard people and property and this aspect of government is what many people respect. Indeed, in Hobbes's Leviathan, he argued that one of the reasons people sacrifice themselves for the good of the state is to preserve the power of the state to protect its members from outside attacks. And one of the stated goals of the United States massive military buildup was so that other countries would either "love us or fear us." Thus, it is clear that people have respect for displays of power. Similarly, the ability of the powerful to bestow gifts of charity on the less fortunate is also well respected. The names of philanthropists like Carnegie and Rockefeller are held in high esteem because they used their power to help those less fortunate than themselves.*

*On the other hand, the ability to show restraint can also engender respect. Recently, the governor of Illinois decided to commute the death sentences of all the prisoners on death row. Such an act of clemency brought high praise from human rights proponents around the world. Furthermore, the fact that democratic governments allow dissent when they could in many cases censor or squash unfavorable opinions also lends credence to the view that restraint of power is what people respect. For example, the arbitrary arrest and sentencing of political dissidents in Russia has brought much international criticism of the Kremlin, while countries that support freedom of speech and the press are widely respected in the world.*

*Ultimately, after considering both sides of the issue, it must be concluded that the exercise of power is most respected. This because even in cases of restraint, the entity in power is still exercising its power.*

*Granting clemency is only possible because the state holds the power of life and death. Allowing dissent is only exceptional because the government has the power to crush it. Thus, it is not the restraint of power that people most respect, it is the exercise of it.*

## FINAL THOUGHTS: WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR TIME

Now that you know how to construct your essay, you have to practice writing essays in a mere 30 minutes. Here's a guideline for how to use your time:

- Find key terms, state opposite side, brainstorm examples: 5–7 minutes
- Formulate thesis: 2 minutes
- Write essay: 18–20 minutes
- Proofread: 1–2 minutes

Notice that not a lot of time is allotted for proofreading. Remember that it's okay to have minor spelling and grammatical errors. Your time is better spent making sure you consider both sides of the issue completely and write an effective essay. For tons more practice, you can go to [ETS.org](http://ETS.org) for the complete list of essay topics.

Your essay doesn't have to be perfect. Focus on the big picture.

## Summary

- Follow the three simple steps to essay success: Think, Organize, Write.
- One of the keys to high scoring essays is good examples. Make sure your examples are relevant to the topic and as specific as possible.
- Try to use examples drawn from your readings, current events, literature, and history. Avoid personal examples.
- Spice up your writing by employing an interesting “hook” to get your readers attention. Consider using such hooks as rhetorical questions, quotes, anecdotes, facts and statistics, and other attention getting devices.
- A good GRE essay presents a smooth flow of ideas and examples. Make sure you use transitions to help your reader follow the progression of ideas in your essay.
- Templates can be effective ways of organizing your essay, but don’t feel restricted to them. Come up with your own template or modify the existing templates as you see fit.

## Chapter 15 The Argument Essay

The Argument essay of the GRE asks you to examine and critique the logic of an argument. The arguments you will see in this chapter are similar to the ones you worked with earlier in the book and you will need to use the same approach to breaking these arguments down. This chapter will show you how to organize and write an essay once you’ve found the premises, conclusion, and assumptions of a GRE argument.

You'll be able to use all the skills we've discussed for the Analysis of an Issue essays on this type of essay as well, but in a slightly different way. Instead of asking for your opinion on a topic, the Analysis of an Argument essay asks you to critique someone else's argument. Before we jump into setting up templates and other pre-construction steps, let's take a look at how Analytical Writing arguments work.

## THE PARTS OF AN ARGUMENT

As seen in the Critical Reasoning portion in Chapter 6, an argument, for GRE purposes, is a short paragraph in which an author introduces a topic and uses reasoning or factual evidence to back up his or her opinion about that topic.

A really simplified example of an argument could be:

*My car broke down yesterday, and I need a car to get to work. Therefore, I should buy a new car.*

The car argument above is composed of three parts:

- The conclusion—the author's opinion and recommendation for action
- The premises—the facts the author uses to back up his or her opinion
- The assumptions—unstated conditions that must be true in order for the argument to make sense

In this argument, the author's conclusion is "I should buy a new car."

The premises the author uses to support this conclusion are that his car broke down yesterday, and that he needs a car to get to work.

The premises must support the conclusion the way table legs support a tabletop. The tabletop is the most obvious and useful part of a table—you see more of it, and you can put things on it. But without the legs to hold it up, it's just a slab of wood on the floor. The same is true for the conclusion of an argument. The conclusion is the part that gets all the attention, since it recommends some course of action, but without the premises to support the conclusion, the conclusion won't hold up.

## Conclusion Words

Certain words indicate a conclusion:

- |               |                  |
|---------------|------------------|
| • so          | • clearly        |
| • therefore   | • then           |
| • thus        | • consequently   |
| • hence       | • as a result    |
| • showed that | • concluded that |

When you see these words, you can be pretty sure that you've found the conclusion of the argument.

## Premise Words

Certain words indicate premises:

- |              |               |
|--------------|---------------|
| • because    | • in view of  |
| • since      | • in light of |
| • if         | • assume      |
| • given that |               |

## ASSUMPTIONS

An assumption is an unstated premise that supports the author's conclusion. It's the connection between the stated premises and the conclusion. In the example of the table, the assumption is that nails or glue hold the legs and the tabletop together. Without the glue or nails, the table will fall apart. Without the assumption, the argument will fall apart.

Sometimes the assumption is described as the *gap* between the facts that make up the premises and the conclusion. They don't always connect, so the assumption is the gap between them.

Let's take a look back at the car argument:

*My car broke down yesterday, and I need a car to get to work. Therefore, I should buy a new car.*

The premises are that my car broke down yesterday and I need a car to get to work. The conclusion is that I should buy a new car.

When you first read this argument, you may have had some questions. These questions might have been along the lines of "Why can't the author just rent a car?" or "Why can't the author just fix the car?"

As you read an argument, identifying the premises and conclusion, questions may pop into your head. Those questions are pointing out the gap that leads to the assumption. Here, the gap is between having a broken car and still needing a car to get to work on the one side, and having to buy a new car on the other side.

Therefore, the assumption must be:  
There is no other way to have a car.

There are all sorts of smaller assumptions here—that the car can't be fixed, that a car can't be rented, that there's no other car the author can borrow—but those are all covered in the main assumption.

The assumption fills the gap between the premises and conclusion, and, in fact, functions as an unstated premise:  
My car broke down yesterday, and I need a car to get to work. There is no other way to have a car. Therefore, I should buy a new car.

Brainstorming for the Argument Essay consists primarily of coming up with a list of assumptions.

## Three Common Types of Arguments and Their Assumptions

As outlined in Chapter 6, there are three types of arguments you are likely to see. They are Sampling, Analogy, and Causal. Becoming familiar with these three types will help you identify the assumptions in the argument more quickly when the clock is ticking on the real test.

### 1. The Sampling Assumption

A sampling argument assumes that A is equal to A, B, and C, or that a small group is representative of a much larger group to which it belongs. To attack a sampling argument, show that one cannot assume that the opinions or experiences of the smaller group are not necessarily representative of the larger group.

### 2. The Analogy Assumption

An argument by analogy assumes that  $A = B$  or that what is true for one entity will be true for another. To attack an argument by analogy, simply show that the two groups or places or individuals are nothing like each other. What is true for one does not have to be true of the other.

### 3. The Causal Assumption

A causal argument assumes that A causes B, or that if you remove the cause, you will remove the effect. While there may be a strong correlation between A and B, it does not always follow that it is a causal relationship or that A is the cause of B.

To attack a causal relationship, point out that there are other possible causes for B and brainstorm some possible examples.

## Well, Great, But Why Do I Care?

You should care about taking apart the argument, and finding the assumptions in particular, because the key to writing a great Argument essay on the Analytical Writing section is ripping apart the argument.

Think about it. The official instructions on the test ask you to “critique” the author’s argument. However, if you claim that everything the author says makes sense, you won’t be able to write an essay that’s more than a few sentences long. This means that in order to write a great essay, you’ll need to tear the author’s argument apart.

**Danger:** The most common mistake people make in writing the Argument essay is expressing their own opinions. Don’t do this! The Issue essay specifically asks you to give an opinion and then back it up. The Argument essay wants a critique of someone else’s opinion, not your own.

## WRITING THE ARGUMENT ESSAY

Writing the Analysis of an Argument essay requires a series of steps.

- Step 1: Read the topic and identify the conclusion and the premises.
- Step 2: Since they’re asking you to critique (i.e., weaken) the argument, concentrate on identifying its assumptions. Look for gaps in the argument, weaknesses in the logic, and new information in the conclusion that wasn’t present in the premises. Brainstorm as many different assumptions as you can think of. Write these out on your scratch paper or on the computer screen.
- Step 3: Select three or four of the strongest assumptions around which to build your essay.
- Step 4: Choose a template that allows you to attack the assumptions in an organized way.
- Step 5: Write the essay, using all the tools and techniques that you’ll be learning in this chapter.
- Step 6: Read over the essay and edit it.

You will have 30 minutes to plan and compose a response to the argument topic, so make sure to budget your time wisely.

Your opinion is not the point in an Analysis of an Argument Essay.

## WHAT THE READERS ARE LOOKING FOR

In the Analysis of an Argument topic section, your job is to critique the argument's line of reasoning and the evidence supporting it and to suggest ways in which the argument could be strengthened. Again, you aren't required to know any more about the subject than would any normal person—but you must be able to spot logical weaknesses. Make absolutely sure you have read and understood the previous section about taking apart the argument and that you can take apart all the arguments in the drills in that section.

The essay readers will be looking for four things as they skim through your Analysis of an Argument essay at the speed of light. According to a booklet prepared by ETS, "An outstanding argument essay...clearly identifies and insightfully analyzes important features of the argument; develops ideas cogently, organizes them logically, and connects them smoothly with clear transitions; effectively supports the main points of the critique; and demonstrates superior control of language, including diction, syntactic variety, and the conventions of standard written English. There may be minor flaws."

To put it more simply, the readers will be looking for all the same things they were looking for in the Analysis of an Issue essay, plus one extra ingredient: a cursory knowledge of the rules of logic.

## Doing the Actual Analysis of the Argument

In any Analytical Writing argument, the first thing you should do is separate the conclusion from the premises.

Let's see how this works with an actual essay topic. The following is the Analysis of an Argument topic you saw before:

Topic:

*The director of the International Health Foundation recently released this announcement:*

*"A new medical test that allows the early detection of a particular disease will prevent the deaths of people all over the world who would otherwise die from the disease. The test has been extremely effective in allowing doctors to diagnose the disease six months to a year before it would have been spotted by conventional means. As soon as we can institute this test as routine procedure in hospitals around the world, the death rate from this disease will plummet."*

Save the fancy prose for English class! Your grader cares more that you can identify the parts of the argument than for a clever turn of phrase.

The conclusion in this argument comes in the first line:

*A new medical test that allows the early detection of a particular disease will prevent the deaths of people all over the world who would otherwise die from that disease.*

The premises are the evidence in support of this conclusion.

*The test has been extremely effective in allowing doctors to diagnose the disease six months to a year before it would have been spotted by conventional means.*

The assumptions are the unspoken premises of the argument—without which the argument would fall apart. Remember that assumptions are often causal, analogical, or statistical. What are some assumptions of this argument? Let's brainstorm.

## Brainstorming for Assumptions

You can often find assumptions by looking for a gap in the reasoning. "Medical tests allow early detection": According to the conclusion, this medical test leads to the early detection of the disease. There doesn't seem to be a gap here.

"Early detection allows patients to survive": In turn, the early detection of the disease allows patients to survive the disease. Well, hold on a minute. Is this necessarily true?

- First, do we know that early detection will *necessarily* lead to survival? We don't even know if this disease is curable. Early detection of an incurable disease is not going to help anyone survive it.
- Second, will the test be widely available and cheap enough for general use? If the test is expensive or only available in certain parts of the world, people will continue to die from the disease.
- Third, will doctors and patients interpret the tests correctly? The test may be fine, but if doctors misinterpret the results or if patients ignore the need for treatment, then the test will not save lives.

"Death rate will plummet": There's a huge gap here in that there's absolutely no explanation of how merely detecting the disease will immediately cause the death rate from it to plummet. This area is ripe for exploration.

The arguments provided for the writing assessment of the GRE typically contain more flaws than those you worked with in the multiple-choice section. The flaws are often easier to spot as well.

## Organizing the Analysis of an Argument Essay

We're now ready to put this into a ready-made template. In any Analysis of an Argument essay, the template structure should be pretty straightforward: You're simply going to reiterate the argument, attack the argument in three different ways (each in a separate paragraph), summarize what you've said, and mention how the argument could be strengthened. From an organizational standpoint, this is pretty easy. Try to minimize your use of the word *I*. Your opinion is not the point in an Analysis of an Argument essay.

### A Sample Template

Of course, you will want to develop your own template for the Analysis of an Argument essay, but to get you started, here's one possible structure:

The argument that (restatement of the conclusion) is not entirely logically convincing, since it ignores certain crucial assumptions.

First, the argument assumes that \_\_\_\_\_.

Second, the argument never addresses \_\_\_\_\_.

Finally, the argument omits \_\_\_\_\_.

Thus, the argument is not completely sound. The evidence in support of the conclusion \_\_\_\_\_.

Ultimately, the argument might have been strengthened by \_\_\_\_\_.

The key to succeeding on an Analysis of an Argument essay is to critique the argument clearly.

## How Would the Result of Our Brainstorming Fit into the Template?

Here's how the assumptions we came up with for this argument would fit into the template:

The argument that the new medical test will prevent deaths that would have occurred in the past is not entirely logically convincing since it ignores certain crucial assumptions.

First, the argument assumes that early detection of the disease will lead to an immediate drop in the mortality rate from this disease, yet it does nothing to explain how this will happen, etc.

Second, the argument never addresses the point that the existence of this new test, even if totally effective, is not the same as the widespread use of the test, etc.

Finally, even supposing the ability of early detection to save lives and the widespread use of the test, the argument still depends on the doctors' correct interpretation of the test and the patients' willingness to undergo treatment, etc.

Thus, the argument is not completely sound. The evidence in support of the conclusion that the test will cause death rates to plummet does little to prove that conclusion, since it does not address the assumptions already raised. Ultimately, the argument might have been strengthened if the author could have shown that the disease responds to early treatment, which can be enacted immediately upon receipt of the test results, that the test will be widely available around the world, and that doctors and patients will make proper use of the test.

### Customizing Your Analysis of an Argument Template

Your organizational structure may vary in some ways, but it will always include the following elements: The first paragraph should sum up the argument's conclusion. The second, third, and fourth paragraphs will attack the argument and the supporting evidence. The last paragraph should summarize what you've said and state how the argument could be strengthened. Here are some alternate ways of organizing your essay:

#### Variation 1

**1st paragraph:** Restate the argument.

**2nd paragraph:** Discuss the link (or lack thereof) between the conclusion and the evidence presented in support of it.

**3rd paragraph:** Show three holes in the reasoning of the argument.

**4th paragraph:** Show how each of the three holes could be plugged up by explicitly stating the missing assumptions.



Variation 2

1st paragraph: Restate the argument and say it has three flaws.

2nd paragraph: Point out a flaw and show how it could be plugged up by explicitly stating the missing assumption.

3rd paragraph: Point out a second flaw and show how it could be plugged up by explicitly stating the missing assumption.

4th paragraph: Point out a third flaw and show how it could be plugged up by explicitly stating the missing assumption.

5th paragraph: Summarize and conclude that because of these three flaws, the argument is weak.

Write Your Own Template for the Argument Topic Here

1st paragraph:

2nd paragraph:

3rd paragraph:

4th paragraph:

5th paragraph:

You Are Ready to Write an Argument Essay

You've separated the conclusion from the premises. You've brainstormed for the gaps that weaken the argument. You've noted how the premises support (or don't support) the conclusion. Now it's time to write your essay. Start typing, indenting each of the four or five paragraphs. Use all the tools you've learned in this chapter. Remember to keep an eye on the time. Again, if you have a minute at the end, read over your essay and do any editing that's necessary.

What To Do with Your Time

Now that you know how to construct your essay, you have to practice writing essays in a mere 30 minutes. Here's a guideline for how to use your time:

- Break down the argument: 3–4 minutes
- Find 2–3 assumptions: 3–4 minutes
- Write essay: 18–20 minutes
- Proofread: 1–2 minutes

Notice that not a lot of time is allotted for proofreading. Remember that it's okay to have minor spelling and grammatical errors. Your time is better spent making sure you consider both sides of the issue completely and write an effective essay.

Practice: Writing an Argument Essay

Practice on the following sample argument topic. If you have access to a computer, turn it on and start up a word-processing program (again, you may want to use a very rudimentary one like Notepad to simulate the ETS program you'll see on the real test). Then set a timer for 30 minutes. In that time, read the topic, brainstorm in the space provided in this book, then type your essay into the computer.

A Sample Argument

*The market for the luxury-goods industry is on the decline. Recent reports show that a higher unemployment rate, coupled with consumer fears, has decreased the amount of money the average household spends on both essential and nonessential items, but especially on nonessential items. Since luxury goods are, by nature, nonessential, this market will be the first to decrease in the present economic climate, and luxury retailers should refocus their attention to lower-priced markets.*

Conclusion:

Why? (premises)

Assumptions:

When writing your essay, make sure to use terms like "causative," "analogy," "sampling" and so forth. Nothing impresses an ETS grader like a sentence like "The argument assumes the sample is representative."

**Ways you can pull the argument apart:**

**Ways the argument could be made more compelling:**

Now use the template you developed earlier in this chapter to type your essay on the computer.

### How to Score Your Essay

It's time to put on your essay-scoring hat and prepare to grade your own essay. (Again, if you're lucky enough to have a friend who is also preparing for the GRE, you could switch essays.) You'll need to be objective about the process. Remember, the only way to improve is to honestly assess your weaknesses and systematically eliminate them.

Set a timer for two minutes. Read the essay carefully but quickly, so that you do not exceed the two minutes on the timer.

Now ask yourself the following questions about the essay:

1. Overall, did it make sense?
2. Did you address the argument directly?
3. Did you critique the argument thoroughly?
4. Did your introduction paragraph repeat the argument to establish the topic of the essay?
5. Did you avoid injecting your own opinion into the essay?
6. Did your essay have three strong paragraphs critiquing the arguments?
7. Did your critiques make sense?
8. Did you flesh out your points to make the weaknesses of the argument explicit?
9. Did the examples apply directly to the topic?
10. Did the essay have a strong conclusion paragraph?
11. Was the essay well organized?
12. Did you use language that made the organization of the essay obvious?
13. Did you use correct grammar, spelling, and language, for the most part?
14. Was the essay of an appropriate length (four to five paragraphs of at least three sentences each)?

If you could answer "yes" to all or almost all of those questions, congratulations! Your essay would receive a score in the 5–6 range. If you continue to practice, and write an essay of similar quality on the Analysis of an Argument essay on the real test, you should score very well.

If you answered "yes" to fewer than 12 of the questions, you have room for improvement. Fortunately, you also know which areas you need to strengthen as you continue to practice.

If you answered "yes" to fewer than 5 of the questions, your essay would not score very well on a real GRE. You need to continue to practice, focusing on the areas of weakness that you discovered during this scoring process.

There are more Argument topics for you to practice in the back of this book, but if you'd like to practice even more, go to [www.gre.org](http://www.gre.org) and view the list of real Argument topics. You cannot possibly practice writing essays on all of these real ETS topics, so don't even try. However, you should spend time reading through them to become familiar with the variety of topics that ETS may give you.

### Just Keep Practicing

So now you've read everything you need to know about writing high-scoring essays on the GRE. With a little practice, writing these essays should become second nature, and you'll find yourself sitting at the word processor on test day confident and prepared. Keep it up!

## Summary

- Always start by identifying the conclusion of the argument.
- Look for the common types of arguments: Sampling, Analogy, and Causal.
- Brainstorm all of the assumptions that attach the premises to the conclusion.
- Outline your essay on your scratch paper before you start writing.
- Leave yourself two minutes to proofread your essay once you are done writing.

## Part V Answers and Explanations to Drills and Practice Sets