Chapter 31

Essays

In This Chapter…

How to Study for the AWA Using This Book

Included in the AWA (Analytical Writing Assessment) section of the GRE are two essays—an Issue Essay and an Argument Essay—with a time limit of 30 minutes each.

If you feel extremely confident about your writing and just want to get a feel for GRE-specific essay writing, feel free to simply read over the topics and some of the sample essays and comments that appear in the *sample responses*.

However, if you need to seriously improve your AWA performance, do NOT read all of the essay topics at once.

Instead, set yourself up with a word processing program on a computer (any text program is fine—the simpler the program, the more the experience will be like the GRE) and a timer. Turn off any spellchecking or grammar-checking feature in your word processing program.

Bookmark the pages in this book that contain the Issue and Argument Essay topics. Set the timer for 30 minutes. When the clock begins, read Issue Topic #1 and plan and write an essay on this topic. STOP when the 30 minutes are up.

Then, without pausing or taking a break, turn to the Argument Essay topics, reset the timer for 30 minutes, read Argument Topic #1 and plan and write an essay on that topic. STOP when the 30 minutes are up.

To review your work, read the commentary and sample essays on these essay topics (found in *Issue Essay Guidelines and Sample Responses* and *Argument Essay Guidelines and Sample Responses*). Compare your essays to the samples. While obviously there are many positions you can take on a particular topic, ask whether your own essays are as well-structured, persuasive, and on-topic as the examples. (We find that Issue Essays on the same topic tend to differ quite a bit from each other, but good Argument Essays on the same topic are often quite similar—each Argument topic has several flaws planted by the writers of the test for test-takers to analyze.)

Practice with the other topics in the same way. You may decide after a few rounds of practice that you only want to practice Issue topics or only want to practice Argument topics. This is fine. But please do observe good practice habits—always time yourself, and keep in mind that reading and thinking about the topic is included in the 30 minutes. Ideally, you should spend about 2–5 minutes reading and thinking about the topic, which will give you 25–28

minutes to write and revise.

Finally, should you exhaust the resources in this book, you may wish to know that ETS, the organization that makes the GRE, has actually released all of its actual Issue and Essay topics! You can read and practice with hundreds of such topics at ETS.org.

Issue Essay Topics

The GRE's AWA (Analytical Writing Assessment) includes two essays—an Issue Essay and an Argument Essay—to be written in 30 minutes each. There is no break in between the essays or after the AWA.

On the computer-based GRE, the Issue Essay prompt will appear on the screen above a text box in which you may write as much as you wish, or as much as you are able, in the 30-minute time limit. Most top-scoring essays tend to be four to six full paragraphs long (although this is not a requirement). You should write an introductory paragraph, two or more body paragraphs with one main point per paragraph, and a concluding paragraph.

You will have scratch paper on which to plan your essay (or you may make notes in the text box and then delete them). The system does not have any type of spell-check, but it does allow you to cut and paste.

According to ETS: Trained GRE readers will evaluate your response for its overall quality based on how well you:

- respond to the specific task instructions
- consider the complexities of the issue
- organize, develop, and express your ideas
- support your ideas with relevant reasons and/or examples
- control the elements of standard written English

Here are the official instructions from the test screen:

> You have 30 minutes to plan and compose a response to the issue below. A response to any other issue will receive a score of zero. Make sure that you respond according to the specific instructions and support your position on the issue with reasons and examples drawn from such areas as your reading, experience, observations, and/or academic studies.

To practice your essay writing, we suggest typing your work into any word processing program on your computer. Start a timer for 30 minutes BEFORE READING THE TOPIC. The time you spend reading the topic and planning your work is part of the 30 minutes. Before you take the real GRE, you need to be able to read a GRE essay topic and plan your work in less than 5 minutes, so you have enough time to actually write the essay.

Discussions of the topics and sample essays are located in the sample responses for this section of the book.

Issue Topic #1

Claim: In order to help small businesses thrive, government should play a minimal role in private business matters.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Issue Topic #2

Schools should do more to prepare students for the non-academic aspects of adulthood.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the recommendation and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Issue Topic #3

People should question the rules of authority as opposed to accepting them passively.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider the reasons for which the statement may or may not be true and explain how these considerations shape your position.

Issue Topic #4

If two applicants for a job are otherwise equally qualified, the job should go to the applicant with more experience.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider the specific circumstances in which adopting the position would or would not be advantageous and explain how these examples shape your position.

Issue Topic #5

Schools should cut funding for extracurricular activities such as sports

and the arts when school buildings are in need of repair.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with this recommendation and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, describe specific circumstances in which adopting the recommendation would or would not be advantageous and explain how these examples shape your position.

Issue Topic #6

Creativity should be used as the only true measure of intelligence.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Issue Topic #7

Government funding for purely scientific endeavors, such as space exploration, should be reduced in order to direct more funding toward humanitarian science projects.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to consider specific instances for which this statement may or may not be true.

Issue Topic #8

The fact that technology is outpacing the needs of those in cultures that can afford the technology creates cultures of excess consumerism.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Issue Topic #9

Luck plays more of a role in determining success than work ethic does.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to both support and challenge your position.

Issue Topic #10

Some people believe that competition drives young athletes to perform at their best, while others believe that competition discourages those who are not athletically talented from participating in organized sports.

Write a response in which you discuss which view more closely aligns with your own and explain your reasoning for your position. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address both views

presented.

Argument Essay Topics

The GRE's AWA (Analytical Writing Assessment) includes two essays—an Issue Essay and an Argument Essay—to be written in 30 minutes each. There is no break in between the essays or after the AWA.

On the computer-based GRE, the Argument Essay prompt will appear on the screen above a text box in which you may write as much as you wish, or as much as you are able, in the 30-minute time limit. Most top-scoring essays tend to be four to six full paragraphs long (although this is not a requirement). You should write an introductory paragraph, two or more body paragraphs with one main point per paragraph, and a concluding paragraph.

You will have scratch paper on which to plan your essay (or you may make notes in the text box and then delete them). The system does not have any type of spell-check, but does allow you to cut and paste.

According to ETS:

> Trained GRE readers will evaluate your response for its overall quality based on how well you:
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> - respond to the specific task instructions
> - consider the complexities of the issue
> - organize, develop, and express your ideas
> - support your ideas with relevant reasons and/or examples
> - control the elements of standard written English

Here are the official instructions from the test screen:

> You have 30 minutes to plan and compose a response to the issue below. A response to any other issue will receive a score of zero. Make sure that you respond according to the specific instructions and support your position on the issue with reasons and examples drawn from such areas as your reading, experience, observations, and/or academic studies.

To practice your essay writing, we suggest typing your work into any word processing program on your computer. Start a timer for 30 minutes BEFORE READING THE TOPIC. The time you spend reading the topic and planning your work is part of the 30 minutes. Before you take the real GRE, you need to be able to read a GRE essay topic and plan your work in less than 5 minutes, so you have enough time to actually write the essay.

Discussions of the topics, as well as sample essays, are in the sample responses for this section of the book.

Argument Topic #1

A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that employees with paid sick leave are 28% less likely to be involved in a work-related accident than employees who do not receive payment for sick leave. Researchers hypothesize that employees with unpaid sick leave feel pressured to work during time of illness for fear of lack of pay. On-the-job accidents are then spurred by impaired judgment or motor skills due to illness or illness-related medications. The highest-risk occupations, such as construction, showed the highest discrepancy in incidents based upon paid and unpaid leave.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to determine whether the researchers' hypothesis is reasonable. Be sure to explain what effects the answers to these questions would have on the validity of the hypothesis.

Argument Topic #2

The city council of Town X has proposed reducing the city's electric expenses by switching all the lights in public buildings from incandescent bulbs to light-emitting diodes (LEDs). The switch would be made gradually as the old incandescent bulbs burn out, and the city council reasons that since LED lights burn brighter and cost no more to purchase, the switch would help Town X save money on electrical costs in the future.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered to help evaluate the efficacy of the city council's proposal to save money on electrical costs. Be sure to explain how the answers to these questions would help to evaluate the council's prediction.

Argument Topic #3

Company X has just switched to a four-day workweek, mandating that employees work ten hours per day from Monday to Thursday instead of eight hours per day from Monday to Friday. Although the policy is new, Company X claims that the policy will help to increase profits by shutting down offices on Fridays and to boost employee morale by reducing commuting time to and from work each week.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Argument Topic #4

Five years ago, the local university built two new dormitories through different contractors: Aleph Construction and Gimmel Builders. The buildings were nearly identical, though it cost Gimmel Builders approximately 20% more to construct its dormitory. Aleph's dormitory, however, has required approximately 10% more in maintenance costs per year over the past five years. Therefore, to construct another new dormitory with the lowest overall cost, the local university should hire Aleph Construction.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions in the expert's claim. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Argument Topic #5

Airline industry representatives have recently argued that flying is safer than driving, citing two separate studies. First, U.S. statistics show that each year there are approximately 40,000 deaths in automobile accidents versus only approximately 200 in flight accidents. Second, studies indicate that pilots are four times less likely than average to have accidents on the road.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to determine whether the argument is reasonable. Be sure to explain what effects the answers to these questions would have on the validity of the argument.

Argument Topic #6

In a laboratory study of two different industrial cleansers, CleanAll was found to remove 40% more dirt and kill 30% more bacteria than the next best cleanser. Furthermore, a study showed that employees working at buildings cleaned with CleanAll used far fewer sick days than employees working in buildings cleaned with other cleansers. Therefore, to prevent employee illness, all companies should use CleanAll as their industrial cleanser.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Argument Topic #7

Downtown Zurzi is becoming increasingly congested with traffic, increasing commuting time for those who work downtown or near downtown. The nearby city of Loft was faced with the same problem several years ago and implemented a small weekly tax for driving one's car downtown. Downtown traffic almost immediately subsided in Loft and the local government also raised much-needed money for fixing roads elsewhere. Obviously, this plan should be implemented in Zurzi in order to solve the brewing traffic congestion problem.

Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

Argument Topic #8

In last year's mayoral election in Town T, candidate Miller led candidate Keating by a substantial margin in the polls leading up to the election. At the last minute, Keating launched a widely viewed series of television advertisements that focused on preserving the natural environment of Town T, a topic neglected by Miller. Subsequently, Keating won the election by a narrow margin. This year, if candidate Miller hopes to win the upcoming mayoral election, he must increase his coverage of the topic of preserving the natural environment of Town T.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Argument Topic #9

Last year, PrepUp had record enrollment in its test prep courses, but yearly profits fell by nearly 30%. In contrast, TopPreparation had comparable enrollment to the year before, with profits rising by approximately 20%. This discrepancy most likely results from the fact that PrepUp teaches only live, in-person classes, which require expensive rental spaces and teaching equipment. Although TopPreparation's total enrollment remained unchanged, its online enrollment increased by 50%, and online classes have much lower overhead costs. In order to address these issues of profitability in the coming year, PrepUp will begin offering online test prep courses.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to decide whether PrepUp's plan for the coming year and the argument on which it is based are reasonable. Be sure to explain how the answers to these questions would help to evaluate the plan.

Argument Topic #10

Cot-Ten, a cotton production company, has recently faced profitability issues based on the use of Chemical X in its manufacturing process. The main by-product produced when using Chemical X is covered under stringent environmental regulations, making it very difficult and expensive to dispose of. A similar processing product, Chemical Y, has recently been discovered, and can be used by Cot-Ten at a minimal cost of switching. The CEO of Cot-Ten has declared that the company will increase profits by switching to Chemical Y by the end of the month.

Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

Issue Essay Guidelines and Sample Responses

Issue Topic #1

> Claim: In order to help small businesses thrive, government should play a minimal role in private business matters.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Unlike some Issue Essay topics, this one isn't too extreme. If a topic says "never" or "always," you almost have to disagree with it. But this topic says "a minimal role," so you really could agree or disagree without taking too extreme a position. Since you are being asked for your opinion—inasmuch as you can back it up with reasons and examples!—there's no reason you *can't* take an extreme position, but extreme positions are simply much harder to defend with solid reasons and examples. There are usually exceptions to any extreme position, and nuanced positions both look a little more sophisticated and are easier to defend.

I can see that government meddling too much in the affairs of small businesses could make it really hard to start a small business (big businesses have people whose entire job it is to do paperwork, but smaller operations can be seriously burdened by complicated systems of permits and permissions). But obviously (to me, anyway!) the government needs to keep businesses from discriminating against employees, polluting the environment, and selling dangerous products (for companies that sell food, vitamins, beauty products, baby products, cars, etc.).

But wait! Before I write about how it's important for government to regulate product safety, pollution, etc.—*actually, I don't think that's on-topic!* I was asked to write about how the government should act "in order to help small business thrive" not "in order to make the world a better place." (I guess I care more about the second part!)

Okay, in order to make sure I stay on-topic, I'm going to argue that the government should regulate small businesses *so the public will trust small*

businesses, which will help small businesses thrive.

It's important to make sure that every reason or example you use ADDRESSES THE TOPIC, and that all of your argumentation is unified under a coherent and on-topic main point.

Note: I also had some other ideas about how maybe the government should protect small business from big business. I was thinking about Wal-Mart putting local shops out of business or Chick-fil-A (a U.S. fast food joint that uses the slogan "Eat More Chicken") suing a man in Vermont who makes t-shirts that say "Eat More Kale." I think this could also make a good point for this essay topic (or a good focus for a whole essay on this topic!), but it doesn't really fit into my other idea (that the government should leave small businesses alone except to protect the public), so I'm not going to use this.

Finally, the topic says "be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position," so I'll make that my third body paragraph. What would my opponents say? I'm thinking here

about people who argue that corporations have the legal status of people, and that people have the right to voluntarily transact as they wish. Honestly, I was just arguing about this on Facebook ("We'd be paying private companies for the privilege of driving over bridges that don't have to meet any government safety standards! There'd be mice in our sausages! Children working 12-hour days in factories! Lunch counters in the South could still be segregated!"), so I feel very prepared. (As well as extremely opinionated!)

Okay, I'm ready to start writing. Here are the notes I'd type into the text box (and then delete as I was writing the real essay):

> Thesis: gov should stay out of small business affairs but should protect human rights and safety
>
> I. Staying out: too many regulations can hamper entrepreneurship
>
> II. Protecting the public is important so public trusts small business
>
> III. Challenges to my position: if people want to freely trade money for services, no one should get in their way (my response: governments always provide services that are impractical for people to provide for themselves, like safety testing)

Note: One good essay time-saver is to copy and paste your introduction into the conclusion spot, and then re-word it as your conclusion. It's easier than writing from scratch!

Essay:

> Small businesses need many conditions in place in order to thrive: startup capital, a suitable location and physical infrastructure, shrewd founders who can adapt to changing circumstances—and also, of course, customers. While, in general, a government's hands-off policy towards small business can help small businesses by freeing owners from time-consuming and cumbersome regulations, it is also the case that some government regulations are needed to protect the public from unscrupulous business owners. This type of regulation not only helps the public, but helps small businesses thrive by increasing consumer confidence in small businesses, as well as protecting ethical small businesses from unfair competition from businesses that break the rules.
>
> The United States has one of the highest rates of entrepreneurship in the developed world—much higher than the rates in Western Europe. Why? In the U.S., virtually anyone can start a business. For about $35,

you can obtain a business license, and then you're officially in business. Hiring the first employee or two is also relatively simple, and some workers can be paid as contractors, which eliminates the need to administer payroll taxes. In contrast, in Western European nations where you need employment papers (and sometimes references) to even open a simple checking account, naturally, the regulations and paperwork needed to start an enterprise can be daunting. Furthermore, laws intended to protect workers mean that it is virtually impossible to fire anyone, which can be a real burden for a small business that simply cannot survive with employees who are not up to the task. The lack of regulation in the U.S. is a strong contributor to the burgeoning of small business in that country.

On the other hand, a pure laissez-faire policy would be disastrous for small business, as well as for society. Should we allow small businesses to sell "health cures" that actually make people sick, or car seats for babies that haven't been through safety testing? Of course not—even if requiring safety testing puts a burden on small business. The safety of the public is important, to be sure, but public confidence is also important if small businesses are to have any customers. Furthermore, some small business owners (just

like large business owners) practice racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and other abuses of workers, such as paying undocumented workers less than minimum wage. It is important for human rights to curtail these abuses; it also helps small businesses for the government to put a check on such practices, because then legitimate, ethically run businesses can compete on a fair playing field.

While this essay propounds a system of minimal to moderate regulation of small businesses, some might argue that government has no right to intrude on the private dealings of businesses and their customers. According to this view, if someone wants to offer unlicensed cosmetic injections, and budget-minded consumers are willing to have their wrinkles filled with who-knows-what, then it is the right of both parties to transact as they wish. However, in developed nations, governments take on, at very least, the provision of services that individuals cannot provide for themselves—military defense, the creation of highways and other infrastructure, and the testing of food and medicine on a wide scale, among others. Individuals do not have the ability to test every can of baby food for botulism or to evaluate the credentials of a "doctor." Thus, in industries in which human health and safety are at issue, some regulation is justified.

How should governments best help small businesses thrive? In some sense, the answer is that governments should back off and let people do as they will. In a free market, many small businesses will be launched, many will fail, and the best will survive. However, some government intervention is required to protect the public from dangerous products and harmful business practices. These regulations ultimately help small business as a whole by encouraging consumer confidence in these businesses.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Emily Sledge:

Concerning government involvement in private business matters, we might imagine a scale from "total" on the left to "none" on the right. Jen has successfully argued for slightly right of center on this scale, making her position clear and taking a more easily defensible position than either extreme would be. Notice some of her techniques: the second paragraph explains her most "extreme" position, giving the United States as an example of how thriving small businesses are correlated with less regulation. So if less regulation is good, wouldn't no regulation be even better? Not so fast! The remaining body paragraphs swing the essay back toward the center, offering examples of why various and diverse stakeholders (the public, small business

owners, employees) benefit from some regulation, and why certain situations require some government involvement. The reiteration of her thesis at the beginning of the fourth paragraph is a nice touch; Jen gives many detailed examples in the third and fourth paragraphs, so it is wise to remind the reader of the big picture periodically.

Issue Topic #2

> Schools should do more to prepare students for the non-academic aspects of adulthood.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the recommendation and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

This is a pretty juicy prompt, as they go, because it's about education. Prompts about business experience or scientific endeavors require a lot more hypothesizing on my part, as I've never been in business or conducted scientific research. But for this prompt, I can draw on personal experience. Everyone's been to school!

While you can rest an entire essay on your own experience, I like to mix it in with at least one fact/hypothetical example, so it doesn't feel like I'm writing some kind of personal essay. However, don't be afraid to use the first person in your essays; it will not cause you to lose points. I would certainly draw on my own opinion of how my academic and non-academic education served me in order to write this essay.

Maybe because I'm the artsy type, I'm going to choose to agree with the prompt, though this one is definitely open enough that you could go either way. My thesis will be that most of post-scholastic life is non-academic, so actually the non-academic should be the *focus* of school. This is slightly more extreme than necessary, but I feel confident that I can support it.

Finally, the topic says "be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position," so I'll make that my third body paragraph. Providing a straw man argument (defined as a sham argument you set up just to knock it down) is never a bad idea in the Issue Essay, but it is of course required with a prompt like this.

Alright. Next, I'd type up a brief outline to make sure I had enough meat for a good essay. Don't forget to delete it from the box before you submit the essay. It probably wouldn't kill you either way, but why confuse your reader?

> Thesis: life after school is non-academic, so non-academic > academic
> P1: Economic crisis because of financial illiteracy

P2: My experience: private school with math/science focus
P3: Challenges to my position: specialized tech jobs require serious academics: response = Microsoft hiring riddle

Essay:

Education is certainly the hot-button issue of the moment, with national policies like Race to the Top and No Child Left Behind changing the way we teach, measure academic success, and even learn. At the heart of the debate over the future of education is the question broached in this prompt: are academic subjects, such as mathematics and history, more worthy of students' time than life skills, such as critical thinking, ethics, and self-expression? Many refuse to let go of the system of rote memorization and strict quantitative evaluation that has long characterized education in America, yet in a fast-paced world characterized by huge systemic problems and constant seismic shifts in science, business, and technology, this system is no longer functional. Adulthood is primarily non-academic, and school is meant to prepare students for adulthood. Thus, schools should indeed do more to prepare students for the non-academic aspects of life.

At the heart of the recent financial crisis was the proliferation of sub-prime mortgages, in which people without any capital were able to procure a mortgage the payments of which they would never be able to afford. How were so many people hoodwinked by predatory loans? It is because their education, in spite of all of its math classes, did not prepare them in any way for the mathematics of the real world. What use is calculus, which only a tiny subset of students will ever use in their lives or jobs, in comparison to lessons in reading contracts or investing intelligently, something that every person will need to do at one point or another? It is not too extreme to suggest that if our schools spent more of their time focused on finance as it actually affects people's lives, the crisis could have been avoided, or at least significantly mitigated.

And non-academic skills are as important on the micro level as they are on the macro level. I attended a private school in Seattle, Washington with a firm focus on mathematics and science; we were required to take both a math and a science class every year, and most of us were encouraged to take AP and honors classes in these subjects. While there is something to be said for working outside of your comfort zone, the intense attention paid to academics came at the expense of those subjects that most interested me. During high school, I competed as a concert pianist and performed in professional theater productions in Seattle. Like me, the vast majority of my classmates did not go into fields involving either math or science, and those years we spent studying academic

subjects to advanced levels caused us to lose out on time we could have spent developing passions from which we might have derived joy for the rest of our lives. Studies show that playing an instrument provides numerous benefits relevant to the non-academic aspects of adulthood, such as managing stress, persevering in the face of failure, and maintaining focus.

Of course, many educational theorists argue that the workforce is increasingly being channeled into either the service economy, comprised primarily of jobs requiring no education at all, or those jobs that require a high level of technical proficiency and thus a specialized academic education. These theorists believe that our only hope of remaining competitive in the world economy is to ensure that our schools focus on academics such as math and science, so that America's children will be prepared to step into those highly specialized jobs. However, it turns out that even the most advanced tech companies in the world claim that mental flexibility is far more important to their hiring decisions than pure knowledge (much of which they would rather pass on through training on-site, in order to promote their own methodologies). At interviews for Microsoft, potential candidates are said to have been asked the following riddle: "Why is a sewer grate round, rather than square?" The answer is that a round grate can never fall down the hole (a square can if you tilt it up and rotate it into the diagonal). Surely no amount of purely academic education

would prepare one to answer a question such as this; only an educational regimen that propounded critical and flexible thinking about real world problems would be of any use.

An academic education is inarguably important. No student should be allowed to leave school without a solid understanding of basic mathematics and the ability to read critically and write coherently. But these skills are merely one part of what makes a well-rounded individual. For too long, American schools have been overly focused on quantifiable metrics of achievement; if we are to compete in the global economy, as well as fix some of the terrible problems afflicting our world, it will be necessary to design a new education premised on preparing students for the lives they are most likely to lead, rather than some idealistic concept.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Emily Sledge:

I thought this essay was strongest when Tommy used even-handed language, as he did in his summation, writing that an academic education is "inarguably important," and that certain basic skills are a minimum educational requirement, but that "these skills are *merely one part* of what makes a well-rounded individual." That's much tougher to dispute than the more extreme language Tommy used in the preceding paragraph: "Surely *no* amount of purely academic education would prepare one to answer a question such as this; *only* an educational regimen that propounded …*thinking about real world problems* would be of *any* use." Fortunately, Tommy's thesis—agreeing with the prompt—is fairly moderate, arguing that we should "do more" to prepare students for the non-academic aspects of life.

While Tommy did an admirable job in a 30-minute essay, an ideal essay might have countered certain objections. Tommy asks, "What use is calculus … in comparison to lessons in reading contracts or investing intelligently?" But aren't academic topics such as reading comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and algebra fundamental to these real life skills? One could make the case that calculus requires and teaches the very "critical and flexible thinking" skills Tommy later cites as important. The sewer grate question is a good one—intriguing if you've never given it any thought. Yet he cites geometry concepts in the answer to the puzzle, suggesting that academic topics are at the core of this "mental flexibility" exercise.

In summary, I liked the mix of personal, business, and education examples, and thought they were well-suited to an argument that academic and non-academic skills are both important to learn.

In general, I would recommend toning down strong assertions (such as those

about the relative value of academic and non-academic study) to make your GRE essays more credible and more difficult to dispute.

Issue Topic #3

> People should question the rules of authority as opposed to accepting them passively.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider the reasons for which the statement may or may not be true and explain how these considerations shape your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stephanie Moyerman:

First, I must establish my "take" on the statement. Paying careful attention to the exact wording, I notice that the statement suggests that people should only *question* the rules of authority, but does not imply or suggest any necessary actions. As I can see no harm in merely questioning the rules of authority, I initially decide that I agree with the prompt. After all, great milestones in modern history, such as the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, have resulted from the questioning of authority.

I must remember, however, that I am not to explain whether I agree or disagree with the prompt, but the *extent* to which I agree or disagree. Any essay in which I express 100% agreement with the statement will be very difficult to defend. Therefore, I decide that my position will be to mainly agree with the statement, but to consider at least one situation in which the statement may not be true. I decide that in the case of elected officials and a government with a system of checks and balances, such as the United States, it would become very difficult to pass any law if all constituents questioned each and every rule. Further, the idea of elected leaders is that they best represent their constituents as a whole. Countries with a varied body of constituents that follow this statement could experience people questioning the laws that obviously benefit the society as a whole. This could lead to disorder, a more segregated society, or, in the very least, the hindrance of governmental progress.

With these points in mind, I type the following notes into the text box:

> Main Idea: In most instances, people should question the rules of authority as opposed to accepting them passively. However, there are specific cases in which adhering strictly to this statement could have negative effects.

I. Questioning the rules of authority, in and of itself, does not suggest necessary actions, just thought.

II. The French and American Revolutions both resulted from questioning the rules of authority.

III. Questioning the rules of authority can lead to disorder, segregation, and/or hindrance of progress in a varied nation with elected officials.

Essay:

Glancing back through modern history, one will undoubtedly notice that many remarkable changes have been sparked by people questioning the rules of authority. One might argue that the outcomes of these changes have weighed on both the good and bad side of human history and that questioning authority can be wrong or dangerous. But it is not the questioning of authority that caused these end results; it is the action of the people involved. Questioning the rules of authority only reveals the necessity for change within an established institution. Thus, I strongly agree with the statement that people should question the rules of authority as opposed to accepting them passively. The questioning of authority incites necessary social and political change without implying any necessary action.

Take, for example, the formation of the United States of America. For years under British rule citizens in the colonies were unfairly taxed and treated in accordance with British law. Not until some very powerful men questioned British rule and stood up to defend their beliefs did the colonies come to think of themselves as an independent entity. Years later, when released from British rule, their original questioning of the rules of authority led the leaders of the United States to take a different authoritative stance than the British. The United States became a democracy ruled by the people. The questioning of authority not only brought about social change, but also had a strong influence on the shaping of future events. In fact, one of our famous forefathers, Benjamin Franklin, famously quoted that, “It is the first responsibility of every citizen to question authority.”

Similarly, but more extreme, the citizens of France in the 18th century lived under the delusion that their monarchy was ordained by God for many years. These years were filled with hardship, starvation, and greed, where the monarchy and those around them lived untainted palatial lives while their citizens lay hungry in the streets. It was not until the masses came to question the monarchy’s rules that social change was brought about and the government was overthrown. In this instance, however, many radical groups came to power after the monarchy collapsed, each reacting to the harsh rules of the previous authority. Eventually, by continuing to question these rules, the French were able to remove their tyrannical rulers and form a republic.

Some might claim that questioning the rules of authority necessarily

implies violent action in the case of civil change: that one cannot exist without the other. This is certainly not the case. Take, for example, Mahatma Gandhi and his fight for India's independence. His questioning of authority not only inspired others to do so, but also inspired them to affect social change via non-violent protest. The questioning of authority, coupled with moral actions, led to the end of much tyranny and injustice throughout the world all through non-violent means.

This is not to say that I think that this statement is the best course of action in every situation and for every person. There are certain situations in which questioning authority could lead to consequences such as segregation, disorder, and/or a hindrance of progress. Take, for instance, the government of the United States, one with elected officials and a system of established checks and balances. When citizens independently elect their leaders, one must bear in mind that these officials are elected to service the needs of the constituents as a whole. In a system where every person questions each new rule, as the statement implies, political leaders must cater to many different viewpoints, hindering progress. Further, natural divisions arise from people with differing views on the laws, such as Democrats and Republicans. These divisions segregate populations and hinder progress as well.

In essence, I agree with this statement as long as it is not taken to the extreme. One cannot achieve social or political change without questioning the authority, and certainly changes have been necessary in our history and will be necessary in our future. However, certain situations do exist where an entire population adhering strictly to this statement could find itself hindering progress and drawing somewhat arbitrary lines among people.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

What an interesting take on this topic! As an American, my first thought when I read this topic was, "Of *course* people should question the rules of authority!" After all, questioning the rules doesn't mean you have to break them—sometimes questioning the rules leads a person to start a political movement or write an article or just sign a petition, and sometimes it causes a person to grow up, major in political science, and then run for office. Questioning the rules is the basis of critical thinking and citizenship!

So, I was pretty surprised to see Stephanie argue that too much questioning of the rules could lead to disorder. While Stephanie made the decision to write a more nuanced essay by taking a middle-ground point of view, I would have written a more hard-hitting essay in favor of questioning the rules all the time. I might have used examples of the civil rights movement in the United States (in which Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others went to jail for breaking the rules in a fight for justice) versus countries in which no dissent is tolerated (such as North Korea). I also tend to use John Stuart Mill's concept of the marketplace of ideas in many essays, and that would have fit very nicely here.

Overall, though, Stephanie has written a well-structured and well-developed essay. Bonus points for the Ben Franklin quote!

Issue Topic #4

If two applicants for a job are otherwise equally qualified, the job should go to the applicant with more experience.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the statement and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, you should consider the specific circumstances in which adopting the position would or would not be advantageous and explain how these examples shape your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from

Manhattan Prep instructor Stephanie Moyerman:

As a relatively young person in America's workforce, I read this statement and my gut disagrees. However, I must be careful not to write a personal reaction essay, but instead to qualify the reasons for my disagreement and use them to shape my writing. In addition, the prompt states that I should consider the specific circumstances in which adopting the position would or would not be advantageous and discuss how these shaped my position.

To brainstorm my essay, I first try to pinpoint exactly why being young gives me such a strong personal reaction to this statement. Adhering to this prompt would certainly put younger applicants at a disadvantage, as they, by virtue of their fewer years on the planet, tend to have less work experience. In fact, if this were taken to the extreme and every

company adhered strictly to this statement, it would become difficult for any young person to be hired into any competitive job due to the sheer number of applicants in today's job market. This would lead to a self-perpetuating cycle: young people lack experience, they miss job opportunities based on their lack of experience, and then are dismissed from future job opportunities because they cannot gain valuable job experience. I am not, however, advocating that jobs should be given to younger applicants, simply stating that judging by experience alone presents a bias against a certain group.

To claim that two people are "otherwise equally qualified" is also extremely vague. In every situation, a less arbitrary test could be constructed. Surely, if experience is that important, it should play a role in the test that decides the outcome. For instance, a coding challenge for otherwise equally qualified candidates for a computer programming job should favor the candidate with more experience, as their experience should equate to being better at such a task. However, if it does not, they should not be chosen for the job simply because their experience is greater.

After careful consideration, I realize that I strongly disagree with the statement. The job should not be given to the candidate with more experience, but should be decided on a case-by-case basis. Perhaps in the extreme case of budget or time constraints a concrete test such as experience would be helpful. Here are the notes I would write:

Thesis: The job should not go to the applicant with more experience, but should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

(A) "Otherwise equally qualified" is a vague term. Can a distinction still be made? Situation dependent—the job itself, colleagues, overall goals, etc., play a rather large role.

(B) The number of applicants for competitive jobs would limit a young person's ability to achieve said job, creating a perpetual cycle.

(C) Extreme cases to favor the other side.

Essay:

In 2006, more than 1,200 applicants applied for a single professorship opening at Harvey Mudd College, a small, liberal arts college in Southern California. The sheer number of applicants, all with PhDs in physics, made the application process extremely competitive. Judging only by resumes, transcripts, statements of intent, and recommendations,

the teaching staff of the college narrowed the pool down to three finalists. With so many applicants for such a competitive position, it became all but impossible to distinguish between those that were most highly rated. In essence, these people were all equally qualified for the job. However, marked distinctions among the finalists remained. They were comprised of a late-twenties recent PhD graduate from CalTech, a late-30s professor from the University of North Carolina, and an early-thirties post-doctoral fellow from Stanford. The school did not defer to their differences in age or experience to decide. Instead, each candidate was flown to the college and presented a prepared lecture to the freshman class of approximately 200 students. The students evaluated each candidate in categories such as clarity and likability. One might imagine that lecturing experience might favor the professor, but in the end, the recent CalTech graduate achieved the highest ratings and was hired by the college. All three finalists had a fair and equal chance at the job upon final decision, though experience was not disregarded by the test. Had the college deferred to experience alone, our CalTech graduate would have been eliminated.

Harvey Mudd College is not unique in its hiring process. Almost all schools defer to another means of judgment for incoming candidates. The sheer number of applicants meeting the benchmark

requirements for every open professorship guarantees two or more equally qualified applicants at the top. And, if every professorship nationwide were decided from this point based on experience, it would be all but impossible for young people to break into college and university teaching positions. Allowing experience to be the deciding factor would create a perpetual cycle—young applicants would be turned down due to their lack of experience, limiting their ability to gain experience and denying them access to future jobs if decided in the same fashion. There is, of course, nothing special about a university teaching position. Many lusted-after job openings experience a similar number of applicants. Judging identically equal applicants by experience appears to be an unnecessary bias against the young, especially when impartial tests remain that could aid in the decision making process.

There are circumstances, however, in which it would be advantageous to simply choose the job applicant with more experience. For instance, had the hiring budget for Harvey Mudd College been much lower, it would have been impossible to fly the candidates out and give them the impartial test that was mentioned. Or, if an applicant had to be chosen on a very short, strict time schedule, such tests of merit would not be feasible. In said cases, it seems acceptable to use experience as the deciding criteria between otherwise identically equal candidates.

Ultimately, unbiased hiring tests appear to be the best option for deciding between otherwise identically equal candidates. Experience factors into candidate performance, but does not become the only deciding factor. However, extreme circumstances, such as short time-scales and limited financial resources, may limit the ability to perform unbiased hiring tests. In these cases, hiring based on experience alone does appear to have its merits.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

I love the unusual introduction of this essay! While many Issue Essays tend to begin with a restatement of the topic, a developing sentence or two, and then a thesis, this essay begins with a story and actually builds a bit of suspense! Who will get the job? As it turns out, not the most experienced candidate. A fantastic and appropriate story.

While Stephanie disagrees with the prompt, she offers a bit (just a bit!) of ground to the other side—she acknowledges that experience should be the determining factor *if* there are budgetary or time limitations. This is ceding very little ground indeed! She's basically saying, "I guess you could do it

your way—if you don’t have time to do it the *right* way.”

I love that the essay doesn’t just go against the prompt—it also offers a suitable alternative (“unbiased hiring tests”). As such, this essay was very persuasive.

Issue Topic #5

> Schools should cut funding for extracurricular activities such as sports and the arts when school buildings are in need of repair.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with this recommendation and explain your reasoning for the position you take. In developing and supporting your position, describe specific circumstances in which adopting the recommendation would or would not be advantageous and explain how these examples shape your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

This is a tricky little topic because we can interpret the circumstances in so many different ways. If we take the phrase "in need of repair" literally, then we might think, "Well, if you *need* to repair it, you have to! What else can we do?"

Real life is never quite this black and white, though. "In need of repair" can mean anything from the imminent collapse of the walls to, hey, there's a dent in this wall over here.

As I thought this through, I realized that, first, I needed to articulate when you would actually need to make a certain type of repair and when you would have more leeway to let something go. In this case, I came up with the idea that a school, first and foremost, delivers academic services. So, if neglecting to make a certain repair would prevent a school from delivering those academic services (or otherwise significantly impair the school's ability to do so), then that repair probably does need to be made. On the other, hand, something of a more aesthetic nature that would not interfere with academics, such as that dent in the wall, may or may not be more important than funding the tennis team.

Ultimately, then, a blanket policy is too heavy-handed. There needs to be a more nuanced ability to decide on a case-by-case basis. At this point, I'd typed up some notes for paragraphs 1 through 3, and I thought, "Hmm. What am I going to do for paragraph 4?" I realized that there was something else bothering me about the statement: why is it a choice between repairs and extracurriculars? Are there no other possible sources of funding? Maybe not, but let's actually establish that before we cut off Friday night football and Monday afternoon debate club.

And voila! I had my paragraph 4 and was able to start writing. Here are my notes:

P1: Disagree that this should be a blanket policy. Depends on other considerations… General principle: academics come first
P2: Do repairs and cut extracurric's: if interferes with academic (heat doesn't work; roof is caving in)
P3: Don't repair if doesn't interfere (paint is fading but not in any way problematic; cosmetic)
P4: Is it really either/or? Alternative sources of funding? Special bonds when major repairs/renovations are needed?
P5: Conclusion

Essay:

The author claims that, when school buildings are in need of repair, the schools should do two things: prioritize these repairs over extracurricular activities and use the funds from those extracurricular activities to pay for the repairs. It is entirely possible that school districts will have to make a difficult choice such as this one, but it would be hasty to put into place a blanket policy without first examining the goals and priorities of the schools. Do schools serve solely to deliver academic services? I would argue no—athletics and art programs are very important as well, though academics are clearly the first priority. A school faced with such a choice might instead base such a decision upon whether the needed repair is one that would interfere with academics if it were not made.

For example, if a school's heating system breaks down in the winter or the roof weakens and is in danger of caving in, then clearly the school will need to make the necessary repairs immediately. If the necessary funding can be obtained only from curtailing extracurricular activities, then those activities must go by the wayside. If the school cannot deliver on its fundamentals (academics), then it cannot (or should not!) offer additional programs that are designed to enrich the core offering but are not a part of the core offering themselves. Note that there are two levels of decision to be made here: whether the problem, if not repaired, will interfere with academics, and whether the funds must come specifically from the after-school activities budget.

Alternatively, suppose that the school could use re-painting but there is nothing dangerous or otherwise problematic about the current paint job; the issue is, in other words, aesthetic. Suppose, again, that the funds for re-painting would have to come from the extracurricular activities fund. Is it more important for the school to be aesthetically pleasing or to offer after-school programs? Reasonable people may disagree as to the answer, and this is the whole point: all repairs are not equal, and it is not necessarily the case that any repair trumps all extracurricular activities.

The examination of these two hypotheticals allows us to uncover a problematic assumption with the original assertion. Is it the case that the school must make an either/or choice: either school repair or extracurricular funding? If significant, necessary repairs are needed, there are perhaps other avenues for funding: government grants, bonds voted for by the local community, even a fundraising drive. At the same

time, for ongoing maintenance issues of a more aesthetic nature, schools might reasonably decide to make some minor compromises—re-paint every six years instead of every four, say—in order to stretch their money to cover extracurricular programs. After all, everyone has to stick to a budget, and we all make trade-offs every day in deciding how to spread our limited funds.

In conclusion, the author's assertion is too narrowly drawn. It is entirely possible that a school may have to cut funding to some extra programs when it finds itself faced with a costly maintenance problem that would interfere with academics if not addressed. After all, the school must first deliver on its mission to educate its students. There are many shades of grey, however, in distinguishing between necessary and "nice to have" maintenance, and it is by no means a foregone conclusion that any kind of maintenance trumps any kind of after-school program. In fact, there are many circumstances in which a school might reasonably defer or minimize long-term maintenance in order to maintain adequate funding for additional activities that can immeasurably enrich a student's life and learning.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

I think that this essay would score a 6 because it questions the definition of terms within the argument ("in need of repair") and then *actually addresses the entire topic*—both the idea about repairs and the idea about extracurriculars. I've read enough mediocre essays to tell you what most test-takers would do with this topic—they would write a whole essay about how sports and the arts are really important. That type of essay is unsophisticated, not entirely on-topic, and quite frankly, childish. Adult life is full of hard decisions: sure, extracurriculars are important, but so are functional school buildings. So, now what? How do we decide between two important things? That's where a good essay should start.

By the way, Stacey writes "grey" in the final paragraph. This is a Canadian/UK spelling (in the United States, "gray" is more commonly used). I mention that because the official graders for the GRE see essays from students around the globe—they see American English, British English, Indian English, and other varieties, and they're used to seeing things phrased or spelled in slightly different ways. These varieties are perfectly acceptable.

Issue Topic #6

> Creativity should be used as the only true measure of intelligence.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

I really struggled to think of examples for this topic. I knew immediately that the position was too extreme and I couldn't possibly agree with it—but specific arguments or examples to support my position? Ugh. So I did something extremely unusual (for me) here. I wrote notes for my first paragraph but, after banging my head against the wall for a minute or so, I then wrote my entire first paragraph without any notes written down for the other paragraphs, hoping that the act of writing would help the brainstorming side of my brain to kick into gear.

And it worked! I was able to keep writing. About halfway through the third paragraph, I went back to my notes to type up a very brief outline of what I

was in the midst of doing, just to make sure that it made sense and that I wouldn't forget what I wanted to do in paragraph 4 when I got there.

You'll also see that I have three capitalized words in my notes for paragraph 1. I wrote this in response to the second sentence of the instructions: we have to address the ways in which others could "challenge [our] position." I always make it a point to acknowledge the other main point of view in my Issue Essays, but because they specifically requested it, I'm going to spend more time on this than usual—likely a paragraph rather than just a sentence or two.

> P1: Examples. ACKNOWLEDGE OTHER SIDE!!! "Only" is extreme —one measure, not "only."
> P2: ?
> P3: ?
> P4: Protest by author: this is just creativity in disguise
> P5: Conclusion

Essay:

Intelligence can be measured in many forms—so many, in fact, that while the concept of intelligence has been around for millennia, we're still debating how to define, let alone measure, such a nebulous concept. Is it a measure of how much someone learns in school? How well someone performs on standardized tests, such as the SAT, or IQ tests, such as the Stanford-Binet? Surely the author of the essay prompt would protest that these are not valid measures of intelligence because an artistic genius—Picasso or Mozart—might not perform very well on such "standard" measures of intelligence. And I agree with the author to this extent: a standardized test should not be the measure by which we seek to quantify or classify intelligence in general—not the only measure, that is. To the extent that we do need to quantify intelligence, we must first answer the question: what particular type of intelligence are we trying to measure?

A standardized test designed for admission to a certain educational program can be a valid measure for someone seeking to quantify how well someone has learned the material tested on that exam, as well as how flexibly someone can apply that knowledge to the particular types of questions seen on the exam. Such an exam, if well-constructed, could help the makers to ascertain how well the person is able to reason through various ideas or solution paths for a narrowly defined set of material, and we might call that a form of intelligence. But is this the only measure of intelligence? Certainly not, as this is not the only type of intelligence.

Let's examine another concept entirely: the EQ, or emotional quotient. In recent decades, researchers have developed this concept to describe how well an individual assesses, expresses, and manages her own emotions as well as those of others. We've all known or heard of at least one "genius" who has an off-the-charts IQ but cannot interact productively with others. We've also likely all known someone who is extremely good with people, though he or she may not have graduated near the top of the class. Which is more intelligent? We haven't even begun to address other types of genius—the comedic genius of Lucille Ball, the gymnastic perfection of Nadia Comaneci, the marketing acumen of Steve Jobs, the "street smarts" of someone with little formal education and none of the "typical" signs of success who has nevertheless developed a strong, stable, and satisfying life despite

hardship.

The author of the prompt might argue that all of these examples are ultimately a manifestation of creativity—that creative thinking allows someone to perform well on a standardized test, or to “read” the emotions or expressions of others and react accordingly, or to dream up the perfect marketing campaign that goes viral in a matter of minutes. If we define creativity that broadly, then I will agree with the author that creativity should always be considered when assessing intelligence. But I maintain that it is only one factor among many, including knowledge, expertise, flexibility, and observation.

If I had to propose one concept to cover all, I would propose that what we’re really measuring is the ability to solve problems (within the context and parameters of whatever the particular “problem” is)—how to capture those water lilies on canvas to best effect, how to time a certain joke to draw the biggest laughs, how to recognize and best respond to an expression of dismay, or disgust, or grief on another’s face. I would prefer, however, not to limit the discussion at all. I am content to let intelligence rest as a complicated, difficult to define, and nearly impossible to measure concept that nonetheless exists in everyone to some degree or another.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

My first thought when I read this topic was, "Wow, a lot of people might be tempted to write a whole essay about how the GRE is dumb and they should be able to submit an art portfolio or something instead." (I can't cite any official rule against it, but you probably shouldn't submit a GRE essay about how you don't like the GRE.)

In any case, I like several things about Stacey's essay—she takes a very fair and balanced position (Lucille Ball, Nadia Comaneci, Steve Jobs), but also follows a rather unique essay structure, leading us through several types of intelligence before synthesizing her ideas in the final paragraph, where she concludes that the best definition of intelligence is the ability to solve problems. I think all of my own GRE essays have given a clear thesis in the first paragraph; this essay flips that structure very effectively, making the conclusion an actual *conclusion,* rather than just a summarization of what came before.

I also liked that Stacey shared her reasoning process with us—who among us doesn't know the feeling of *freaking out* because you can't think of what to write? Sometimes you just have to start writing and work it out as you go.

Issue Topic #7

> Government funding for purely scientific endeavors, such as space exploration, should be reduced in order to direct more funding toward humanitarian science projects.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to consider specific instances for which this statement may or may not be true.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

I found it easy to come up with my "take" on this one but difficult to come up with specific examples. I knew in general that technologies originally developed for space exploration are now being used in a whole host of things here on Earth, but I wasn't 100% sure about the details. In particular, as I wrote my essay, I realized that healthcare examples would relate best to my other examples, but I was also the most shaky on the healthcare details. So, honestly, I sort of guessed—I wrote in some details as though I were

confident, but I could be wrong. (And, no, I did not go back and correct them before publishing this! I want you to see what I really did.)

We're actually allowed to do this; the essays are not fact-checked. I'm not going to say that man first landed on the moon in 1842, because I know that's completely not true, but if I do have some details that aren't quite right, I'm not going to be penalized for that. If you think about it, it makes perfect sense: the essay graders can't possibly take the time to fact check every last thing, and so they check nothing.

I want to point out one more thing: my final essay is a bit shorter than usual (although still longer than many high-scoring Issue Essays), and that reflects that fact that it took me longer than usual to work out what I wanted to write. At some point, though, I had to cut off my planning and start writing or I wouldn't have had enough time to finish—and that's when I realized that I needed to "fudge" on my details a little.

Here are my original notes. After I wrote my opening paragraph, I realized that I should switch paragraphs 2 and 3 in order to provide a better transition into paragraph 4:

P1: Specific examples. Prioritize humanitarian science over pure science. Why? Benefits? Goals?
P2: Techs developed via space expl. projects are used extensively on earth (communications: cell phone; healthcare: robotic components that help in surgery; energy: solar cell panels)
P3: "Humanitarian" = broad, but let's say health and education projects? Sometimes we do want to prioritize these
P4: But find a balance between the two, b/c "pure science" can result in "humanitarian" help
P5: Conclusion

Essay:

The author claims that humanitarian science projects should be prioritized over pure science projects, to the point of redirecting funding from pure science to humanitarian science. There are perhaps some instances in which this would be judicious, but in the absence of any discussion of the goals for such funding and the possible benefits to be obtained, such a black-and-white policy is likely too simplistic. Further, the author appears to assume that this is a zero-sum game: that such funding must go to one or the other and that the same amount of funding will be "worth more" by some (unspecified) measure if spent on humanitarian projects.

It would be helpful to examine specific cases in order to make this abstract argument a bit more concrete. "Humanitarian" is a broad term, but let's assume that the author is referring to projects that will provide healthcare or education to communities currently lacking such services in some significant way. (The term humanitarian could, of course, refer to many other types of research, community outreach programs, and so on—but we're trying to discuss one tangible example.) Vaccinating children against smallpox and measles is an obviously high-priority task: the technology exists, it is not prohibitively expensive, and it will both save lives and improve quality of life immeasurably. In any prioritization of funds, this particular usage must be near the top.

It is also the case, though, that many technologies originally developed during space exploration projects are now used in mission-

critical “humanitarian” arenas. For instance, remote monitoring of vital statistics (such as heart rate and blood pressure) via miniature devices that can be affixed to or implanted in the body—or even swallowed!—allows us to monitor someone’s health when that person is not physically in a healthcare setting. Other miniature remote-controlled devices (robots, if you will) are used in surgical settings to minimize the invasiveness of the procedure, or even to perform a maneuver that is impossible with traditional surgery. Satellite networks allow us to monitor weather patterns and broadcast information about the approaching hurricane immediately, potentially saving tens of thousands of lives.

Further, it isn’t necessarily sufficient to look at the goals and expected benefits in the short-term. When NASA scientists were developing ways to monitor the health and manage the treatment of astronauts from afar, they likely weren’t anticipating the myriad ways in which the technology would ultimately be used “on Earth.” Early photovoltaic technology was developed almost exclusively in space because access to the sun’s rays was free and easy. Decades later, solar cells are a leading source of terrestrial “clean” energy and one of the leading candidates to replace fossil fuel energy should we one day find ourselves in the position of running out of Earth-based energy sources.

Any approach, then, that paints all "humanitarian" projects with one broad stroke ("worthwhile") and "pure science" projects with another ("less important") is too crude an approach to make such very nuanced decisions. Given limited funds, of course priorities will have to be determined and a tough balance struck. History demonstrates convincingly, however, that what begins as a "pure science" project might one day prove to be a "humanitarian" effort that can affect the lives of every person on the planet.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

In spite of Stacey's claim that she struggled to come up with ideas for the prompt, you certainly wouldn't know it from reading this essay! In truth, you should never look like you're at a loss for facts, because any details you're unsure about can be fictionalized, as long as you'd be willing to bet good money that your *overall concept* is correct. In other words, you may not know exactly why sugar is bad for the body, but you can feel free to say, "Sugar is bad for the body because the calories are burned quickly—causing the notorious sugar rush—leaving the body starved for nutrients in the long term." Are you sure that's exactly how it goes down? Nope. But it's more than good enough for your purposes. That being said, if you *can* write an essay entirely with stuff you know is true, you're likely to be more confident, and thus sound more confident.

If you wanted to take the other side of this essay, you could start by discussing the enormous amount of federal money that goes to weapons development, and argue that this investment has paid very little dividends in terms of raising our standard of living. In the next paragraph, you could discuss a small investment that has paid huge dividends in this regard, such as vaccination research in the 19th century, research into antibiotics, or agricultural improvements that have allowed for the production of greater and greater amounts of food to be grown on the same amount of land. Finally, because the prompt asks you to consider the other side, you could use Stacey's example, discussing how research conducted by NASA often results in practical products and techniques used in a more humanitarian way down the line. You could then argue that this is all well and good, but surely it would be more efficient to simply invest that money in those humanitarian projects in the first place.

Issue Topic #8

The fact that technology is outpacing the needs of those in cultures that

can afford the technology creates cultures of excess consumerism.

Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Roman Altshuler:

This is a pretty broad statement. Supposedly, it applies to *all* cultures that are affluent enough to afford technology. The claim looks really obvious, so my first thought is this: GRE essays are supposed to show complexity. If you agree with a prompt that says something obvious, it's going to be pretty difficult to say anything complex about it. On the other hand, if you disagree with a prompt that says something that seems obvious, you have an easy way to make your essay complex: you just explain that what the prompt claims is *too* obvious. It's based on a superficial understanding of the facts.

Notice, also, that the prompt asks you to “address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to challenge your position.” The strategy of explaining why the claim is too obvious does that automatically: I just describe why the appearances are misleading, and by describing them I am already listing reasons that could be used to challenge my position.

So now I am thinking about content. What am I going to write about? I don’t want to write about technology in general, because it seems like that will be too broad. So instead I am going to pick a particular instance of technology that I’ll focus on for most of the essay as an especially salient example (and I’ll call it an “especially salient example” in the essay, because that sounds fancy and uses a GRE word). How about cell phones? I just got a new one, so I have a bunch of thoughts about cell phones that I can draw on. The example seems a little too banal, but that’s okay, as long as I can say things about it that aren’t.

So now what about my argument? I think about whether people would buy crap they don’t need if it didn’t exist. Well, obviously not. But all that crap wouldn’t exist if people didn’t want to buy stuff. So maybe the prompt gets things backwards: it’s not that the existence of lots of unnecessary technology makes people buy it. It’s that people in a consumer culture want to have more stuff to buy, and that’s why there is so much unnecessary stuff.

The prompt’s mention of “cultures that can afford the technology” makes me think of affluent cultures and the poor societies their consumerism exploits. Maybe I can say something about that. I put that thought on the back burner; I’ll try to get something out of it if I need an extra paragraph.

The prompt also mentions that the problem is with technology that is “outpacing the needs” of people in certain consumer cultures. How do we know when technology “outpaces needs”? I see a few problems right off the bat. First of all, needs change. It’s easy to say that something is unnecessary or frivolous when looking from the outside, but from the inside the growth of technology creates its own needs. For example: I *need* a tablet, because I read a lot and want to carry large amounts of reading material with me everywhere. Also, we don’t always know that a culture “needs”: technology often *seems* unnecessary, but turns out to satisfy needs in hindsight. I remember how cell phones, with their access to social networks, were crucial in mobilizing protesters in the revolution in Egypt. I’ll use that as an example.

And anyway, is it really clear that there *is* lots of technology that outpaces needs driving consumer culture? Some people will buy anything that’s new,

but maybe most people don’t buy stuff that they really don’t need. I could be wrong about that, but it’s worth making an argument for it.

Now I clearly have enough to write about, so I won’t need to talk about affluent vs. disadvantaged cultures after all. Instead, I’ll focus on the idea that technology outpaces needs. By questioning the premise of the prompt, I can give a nuanced, somewhat unusual take on the issue. And then I’ll wrap up that approach by insisting that *even if the premise is right*—that there is lots of technology on the market that nobody needs—it’s *still* not true that this causes people to buy stuff they don’t need.

I've been jotting notes as I go, so at this point I have the following written:

> Intro: cell phones. Thesis: it looks like tech nobody needs drives consumerism, but this gets things backwards and mistakenly assumes that people are buying stuff they don't need.
>
> 1. People don't buy things that nobody needs.
> 2. Needs change. Sometimes tech satisfies needs nobody knows about yet. Arab Spring example.
> 3. Consumer culture leads to new technology, not the reverse.

As I get to each point, I delete it. And it's important to always keep the broader picture in mind, so when I develop the points, I have to explain what they have to do with the overall theme.

Essay:

> As a result of constant competition and innovation, technology evolves at a staggering rate. Fifteen years ago mobile phones were a novelty for the privileged few; now they are the possession of roughly 70% of the world's population. And, of course, it is not enough simply to release a new kind of product and sell it: the product must be constantly updated, developed, and marketed in a new form. Better battery life and reception, global positioning, access to the Internet, the ability to download music from the "cloud," or to take photographs and immediately share them across one's social network; all these are developments that have sprung sequentially from manufacturers in relatively short order, each one used to market a new generation of phone to eager consumers. And, of course, cell phones are only one example among many, though an especially salient one. The constant release of updated forms of the same technology, combined with the existence of a ready market to adopt these upgrades, conveys the appearance that the updates drive purchasing for the sake of purchasing; that if not for the oncoming tides of new products, the waves of spending would abate. But the appearance gets the relation backwards, and it relies on too simplistic a view of what the relation between technology and the needs of a culture might be.
>
> First of all, it is far from obvious that technology that genuinely outpaces the needs of its consumers retains a consumer base. Items that fail to find a public often vanish without a trace. Consider the push on the part of a number of computer manufacturers at the dawning of the

last decade to market expensive tablet computers. The attempt went nowhere, and tablets vanished from the market to return only ten years later when a need for them appeared. The history of technology is replete with such market failures which, precisely because they were failures, rarely make it into public memory. This tendency to forget where the market has failed is perhaps the best explanation for the tendency to believe that unnecessary technological advances drive consumers' tendency to purchase every new bit of technology, no matter how little needed. But in fact, it seems, technology that outpaces the needs of a culture simply vanishes from that culture without taking hold. Of course every affluent culture has a wave of so-called "early adopters," who will buy the newest gadget, no matter how useless. But segments of the population who will spend on items they cannot even fathom needing are, unsurprisingly, small.

Granting that technology that outpaces the needs of its market base sometimes fails, it may still seem as if this is often not the case; that, in fact, frequently technological advances are purchased and adapted on a wide scale by a culture, even when ostensibly no need for such a technology is present. The judgment that occurrences of this sort are common, however, faces serious objections. What, first of all, can we mean by the idea of technology "outpacing the needs" of its users? If we think of needs in the most basic terms, as universally shared by all human beings, then the list of genuine needs will be quite small:

food, shelter, clothing, and companionship. But even this small list of basics requires supplementation. Medicine, for example, seems like a basic need; but the need for medical technology is in principle limitless as long as human beings remain mortal. It is not so clear, then, that—at least in some areas—technology really can outpace need. It is also worth considering that technological advances in some seemingly frivolous fields may transfer to advancements of vital necessity. Finally, just as basic needs appear in some respects infinite, so the advancement of technology can create new needs, perhaps ones unforeseen prior to its development. A technologically advanced culture, for example, may well have needs far beyond those of its less affluent analogues; such needs may well appear trivial to outsiders. And, of course, the fact that some bit of technology does not satisfy a clear need at present does not show that it satisfies no need of the culture: one need only consider the role played by mobile technology—which may have appeared excessive when it first appeared—in the recent events of the Arab Spring.

Just as we find it difficult to definitely declare that any particular technological upgrade has outpaced the needs of its culture, so we should be suspicious that such outpacing, where it occurs, genuinely drives the consumerism. Affluent cultures constantly demand new outlets for their affluence; technology is merely one of the many industries that responds to that demand. It is not hard to imagine that those with money to spend will want to spend it. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that excess consumerism drives the demand for new products, not the reverse. Moreover, the consumerism is fanned by any number of marketing techniques, themselves produced by companies eager to increase their profit margin. Often, new developments in technology, as in other industries, come about in response to the need to market new products. But again, it is the marketing and the cultural response to it that drives innovation here. The innovation exists for the sake of the marketing and consumerism, not the other way around. That new, seemingly frivolous technology is constantly produced, marketed, and purchased may give the appearance that it is new technology that causes the consumerism, but the reverse may well be the case.

We should be skeptical, then, of the view that unnecessary technology creates cultures of excess consumerism. While often this is how things may look on the surface, in reality the complex relations between technological innovation, need, and consumerism are far more complex. New technology creates new needs, and the consumers' demand for new products creates those products. To blame technology, especially

technology that seems to have no necessary application, for the increase in consumerism is to misdiagnose the situation; it is to mistake the symptom for the underlying cause.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

When I read this essay, I almost laughed—"This incredibly lengthy, well-reasoned, well-argued essay is going to intimidate the heck out of our students!" It's worth mentioning that the friendly GRE instructor we know as Roman is known in some circles as "Dr. Altshuler, philosophy professor." So, consider this essay an ideal—not a standard most test-takers would be able to meet in a mere 30 minutes!

One thing that's especially excellent about this essay is the complex argumentative structure. Roman didn't just argue yes or no. Rather, he broke the topic into two claims: "technology is outpacing needs" and "this creates cultures of excess consumerism." He then questions the definition of "needs," argues against the first claim, and then argues that *even if the first claim is right,* the second claim still doesn't work.

This is a thorough way to attack an argument! (You say A will lead to B? A isn't true, but EVEN IF IT WERE, it wouldn't lead to B.) It's like you're winning the argument *twice.*

I also really enjoyed the example about the Arab Spring. This is a perfect example of a seeming "luxury" serving a noble and important purpose. (If I were writing this example, though, I'd include at least a sentence explaining what the Arab Spring is, just in case the grader hasn't heard of this historical event.) This is also a good reason to keep up with current events—students who complain they have "nothing to write about" would generally benefit from a daily dose of news coverage.

Finally, keep in mind that there's no requirement that you take such an argumentative approach—this is the Issue Essay, not the Argument Essay. So, you could certainly choose instead to agree with the prompt and give examples of technology leading to excess consumerism.

Issue Topic #9

> Luck plays more of a role in determining success than work ethic does.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with the claim. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address the most compelling reasons and/or examples that could be used to both support and challenge your position.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Chris Berman:

The stimulus asks that the response address the evidence for both positions—this must be accomplished while establishing a clear and defensible position. To receive a top score, the essay must consider defining the terms ("success") used in such broad statements. Precisely understanding the statement presented is also very important; this one revolves around luck playing *more* of a role, and an essay that argued that success was due entirely to one or the other would not be completely responsive.

Finally, note any assumptions underlying either position that could be utilized. For instance, if I were to argue in favor of the preeminence of work ethic, I could discuss the assumption that luck does or doesn't even out in the long run. However, when all is said and done, I have to argue the position for which points and examples leap to mind. I will posit the greater importance of luck, as my notes show:

> Main point—the importance of luck is supported by the vast majority of the historical evidence, and the opposing position rests on questionable assumptions and less compelling evidence.
>
> 1. Examples that support this point

2. Opposing points and their flaws
3. Opposing assumptions and their flaws
4. Brief summation

Essay:

While no one should deny the utility of a strong work ethic in pursuit of material success and professional recognition, luck has a greater power and can deliver or destroy the dreams of both the earnest and the slothful. The truth of this perhaps ironic or even tragic aspect of life is borne out by the historical record. Military history is rife with examples of how fortune changes “the affairs of men.” One such example would be Frederick the Great, the 18th century Prussian king. Famous both for his personal work ethic and for his imposition of the same on his soldiers, he is virtually universally acknowledged as the foremost military leader of his time. Yet, he was only saved from utter defeat by the unexpected death of the Empress of Russia. Sports history is also rife with examples of luck trumping effort. “Hollywood” also provides a plethora of examples of how good or bad luck determines the fate of hard working actors—Lana Turner, a star of the 1940’s, was “discovered” at Schwab’s drugstore. More quotidian lives follow the same pattern—inventors who lose the fruits of their labors through chance, and countless industrious people whose lives were undone by chance accidents or disease.

This aspect of life is also frequently mirrored in literature, plays, and songs. The deus ex machina of Greek tragedy is the beginning of a long lineage of art describing the superiority of fate to human will. Some would counter by arguing that fiction embraces the triumph of hard work and point to the Horatio Alger stories and similar works. However, not only are such examples smaller in number, but many of them were crafted expressly to tout that virtue in the service of building a society rather than to accurately depict the realities of life. Furthermore, it could also be argued that those who strived and succeeded against obstacles merely had enough good luck to dodge a fatal blow in one form or another. While Puritan and Lutheran philosophies laud the worth of work ethic, these essays were based on theological rather than pragmatic grounds. In fact, many were expressly composed to explain and counter the reality of the preeminence of random fortune.

Additionally, dubious assumptions underlie some of the main arguments in favor of the primacy of work ethic. Implicitly, the opposing view equates work ethic with the quality of the work. While there is certainly a correlation, there is no causation between effort and excellence. No matter how hard I were to work, I will never be a

professional athlete of any sort. Also, the counterargument assumes that there is sufficient demand for the supposed excellence derived from effort. To return to the “Hollywood” example, there it is glaringly obvious that there is an oversupply of capable and objectively similarly skilled actors; thus, logically enough, random factors and good fortune become the primary determinants. I have personally seen actors cast because they remind the directors of their brothers. I have also seen actors not cast for exactly the same reason. Such oversupply is a characteristic of many, albeit not all, fields. Finally, the assumption that an individual’s luck will return to the mean, as it were, is dubious. Again, history, the arts, and most people’s anecdotal evidence point to the conclusion that some are luckier than others, even if no one lives an absolutely charmed life. Perhaps one lifetime is too small a sample size.

To reiterate, while a strong work ethic is sometimes necessary for and usually contributes to success, luck is the more powerful factor. The record of human activity leads to no other conclusion. To that point, there is an old saying that remains only too relevant: “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans.”

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Great essay! Chris writes in a literary and somewhat formal style, which I think makes a powerful first impression ("luck … can deliver or destroy the dreams of both the earnest and the slothful"). Because of the writing style, I can say I wasn't surprised at all to see the essay introduce examples about literature, from Greek tragedy to Horatio Alger.

I also very much enjoyed the essay's critical takedown of Alger as an example of work ethic being more important than luck and of Protestant denominations' propounding of work ethic (which some people still call "Protestant work ethic"). In both cases, Chris argues that these do *not* make good examples of the primacy of work ethic over luck, because the sources had ulterior motives. The argument about an oversupply of talent was also persuasive (if there are more hard workers than there are jobs for those hard workers, luck will end up being the deciding factor).

If I had been writing an essay on this topic, I would have also argued in favor of luck, although I'm sure it would have been a very different essay. I probably would've written a lot about how what country you're born in has a lot more to do with your success than the efforts you put in. In a developed nation, you benefit from health care, roads, infrastructure, public education, and some kind of safety net for hard times, whereas none of these are reliably available in many of the nations of the world. Some people are born in war zones or refugee camps; some people think they're signing up for a job opportunity and end up becoming victims of human trafficking. Hard work is irrelevant in these cases.

If you wanted to go the other way on this topic and argue that work ethic is more important than luck, you can't *just* write about the importance of hard work. You also need to address the obvious objections—what about all the people who obviously got lucky (or unlucky)? I think that would be a hard essay to write. However, you could pursue some kind of middle ground approach, perhaps something like, "Good luck is an essential ingredient of success, but most strokes of luck are useless without the work ethic to pursue those opportunities."

Issue Topic #10

> Some people believe that competition drives young athletes to perform at their best, while others believe that competition discourages those who are not athletically talented from participating in organized sports.

> Write a response in which you discuss which view more closely aligns with your own and explain your reasoning for your position. In developing and supporting your position, be sure to address both views presented.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Jesse Cotari:

When I look at this prompt, my first thought is: *How do I take a side when both sides are pretty accurately describing facts, rather than offering opinions?* But instead of dwelling on that issue, I kick the question to my subconscious and get to work thinking about each side of the issue. I do some brainstorming, write the first sentence of the introduction, and then start in on the first two paragraphs. My goal at this point is to establish both sides' validity with examples of how they could both be correct, which will set up for whatever twist is coming that will drive my later paragraphs.

(I’m a big believer in giving my unconscious mind something to work on while I’m focusing attention forward. Typing takes mostly time and attention, whereas figuring out a creative “take” on an idea sometimes just takes right-brained inspiration. Instead of sitting around waiting for inspiration to strike, I get working on less creative processes like typing out an already-outlined paragraph.)

By the time I finish the first body paragraph, I have a pretty good idea of where the rest of the essay is going, so I take a moment to do a little more outlining, focusing on the deeper implications of either viewpoint.

If it were necessary to take an unqualified view in support of one side, I would have had a hard time. However, the possibility of including nuance makes this much easier. First, I decide to define the “unspoken assumption” behind each argument. Why would someone say one or the other of those statements? Probably to push a particular type of sports program. Okay, so let’s talk about that.

At this point, despite the fact that I see the validity of both sides, I take a qualified side with “everybody wins!” This means positing that collaboration is more important than perseverance. Do I believe that that’s 100% true all of the time? No, but I can make a case for other sources of perseverance in addition to sports, so I’ll go with it. I finish up the introductory paragraph, write the second body paragraph, and then, the conclusion.

OF NOTE: I know that my process in this case is risky. Since I’m writing the essay in a non-linear way, I leave a little time to go back and be sure that everything flows.

Essay:

> The statement above presents two conflicting presentations of the same true facts: It is unquestionable that athletic competition both drives and discourages young athletes. However, unspoken assumptions as to the purpose of organized sports underlie significant differences in the implications of either statement. By understanding these underlying assumptions, it is possible to decide which aspect of organized sports is most beneficial to potential young athletes. While being driven to one’s best through competition certainly has its benefits, the values of teamwork and collaboration that can be derived from any athletic participation are more important to success in the rest of life.

The first view, that competition drives young athletes to perform at their best, can be clearly examined through the lens of track and field. The immediate feedback received from watching a competitor pull ahead makes a direct psychological impact on any runner. In head-to-head competition, the direct ability to compare one's performance with that of one's rivals can be intensely motivational. Even after the race, the knowledge that with a little more practice victory could have been achieved can impel a young competitor to run those extra miles in preparation. This direct comparison with the abilities of others is one factor that can drive young athletes to be their best, but also makes the opposing viewpoint valid as well. Those who are not "athletically talented" make the comparison and instead of seeing reasons to put in more hours of practice, see reasons not to bother. Constantly failing to win can indeed be highly discouraging. Thus it is unquestionably true that both discouragement and personal drive are potential side effects of organized sports.

At a more fundamental level, however, it is not the viewpoints themselves, but the unspoken assumptions as to the purpose of organized sports that are incompatible and make siding against competition possible. The first view, that competition drives athletes to be their best, is a valid aim if being good at sports is a useful end goal. Does being able to run 400 meters faster than anyone else in the country serve

any practical purpose? In a world generally free from the necessity to escape large predators, probably not. Nonetheless, it is true that the perseverance and dedication necessary to achieve that goal are worthy skills. The ends of development of dedication should, however, be compared with the opposing assumption: that playing a team sport is valuable, regardless of the level of success. Through participating in a team sport, young athletes can develop the ability to work with others to a common purpose. In the modern workplace—focused on teams, interactivity and collaboration—this life skill offers a clear advantage. While perseverance can be developed in other areas (particularly academic ones, where the benefits are more tangible), few pursuits offer the ability to develop the skills required to participate in a team. Deemphasizing the competitive aspect of team sports (or at least providing the option to play team sports in a less competitive environment) allows the development of collaboration to reach a wider youth population and spreads the benefits of organized sports to more young athletes.

In the end, the statements present two true facts that have different implications. Both perseverance and teamwork are vital to the success of any adult, and are worthy goals of an athletic program. However, by reducing the emphasis on competition, the benefits of working with a team can accrue to a larger cohort of young athletes.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Essays on very specific topics are challenging! Personally, I would be very annoyed to get this topic—as a reasonably educated person, I feel like I have a lot of fields to draw on for relevant and persuasive examples, but here I cannot use any of my knowledge because I am pretty much forced to write about children's sports.

Jesse does a great job with this topic, correctly identifying that both statements about youth sports have some truth to them, and so we must decide what we most value if we are to decide which truth is most important.

I was also *fascinated* by Jesse's writing process, in which he uses his subconscious mind to do some processing while he does the more tedious work of typing. If you wonder how some people think through an essay topic and write such long and well-developed essays all in 30 minutes, well … this is one way to do it!

Personally, I find that I'm able to think of and write so much in half an hour

because I have a lot of practice. But maybe more importantly, I have a structure in mind before I begin writing (intro, three body paragraphs, conclusion), so I feel almost like I'm just dropping some details into a form or something. Finally, successful essay writers are often people who read a *lot,* on a variety of topics—and people who look things up when they don't know something! It can be frustrating when you want to write about the electric car because it perfectly fits the topic, but you realize you don't actually know anything about electric cars. Prepared test-takers are people who do a lot of reading (world news, science news, business news, the *New York Times Review of Books*, etc.), and whose natural curiosity leads them to Google or Wikipedia to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

Of course, when you get a topic about children's sports, it's hard to make a lot of that knowledge base fit, but it can be done—off the top of my head, Rousseau's *Emile* and the theories of Piaget on child development could be used in an essay on this topic, even though they have nothing specifically to do with sports. Similarly, an example about the history of the Olympics could apply—as long as you explain how an example about adults applies to children. Also keep in mind that there isn't actually a requirement to bring in outside examples or information, as long as you can find enough to write about just making general/hypothetical arguments about the prompt itself. Jesse's essay is an excellent example of this approach.

Argument Essay Guidelines and Sample Responses

Argument Topic #1

> A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that employees with paid sick leave are 28% less likely to be involved in a work-related accident than employees who do not receive payment for sick leave. Researchers hypothesize that employees with unpaid sick leave feel pressured to work during time of illness for fear of lack of pay. On-the-job accidents are then spurred by impaired judgment or motor skills due to illness or illness-related medications. The highest-risk occupations, such as construction, showed the highest discrepancy in incidents based upon paid and unpaid leave.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to determine whether the researchers' hypothesis is reasonable. Be sure to explain what effects the answers to these questions would have on the validity of the hypothesis.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

I read the instructions first, then the argument. The instructions focus on the "questions" needed to evaluate the argument; because I knew this when I started making notes, I was able to put as many as possible into question form. Later, when I began to write, I already had many questions that I could fold right into the argument.

The argument has two significant flaws. First, the study results (in sentences 1 and 4) do not address any part of the hypothesis (that is, whether people are working while ill and whether that then causes accidents). Second, the argument fails to address (and dismiss) any alternative explanations for the data.

My raw notes are fairly long, but notice how I've got them organized paragraph by paragraph. When I start writing, I actually type right underneath the notes for each paragraph, so that I can reuse exactly what I've already typed and then simply delete any extraneous words. This is similar to writing a detailed outline first and then fleshing out the first draft. The only thing I don't brainstorm is the conclusion—my conclusion will just be a restatement of everything I've already said. Here are my notes:

P1: Hypothesis = pressured to work. But evidence doesn't show WHY there are more accidents. Conjecture.
P2: Can the existing data be made to show actual causation? Study could poll people as to why they had the accident. Did they actually come to work sick?
P3: Other possible explanations? Differences based upon job title or level? Desk-job workers probably less likely to have accidents; are they also more likely to have paid sick leave? Blue-collar jobs more likely to cause accidents and also less likely to offer paid sick leave? Salary vs. hourly wage work?
P4: Other reasons why people feel pressured to work? Perhaps unpaid sick leave correlates with certain kinds of jobs where it's more problematic for a team if someone doesn't show up for work that day. *(Note: as I wrote the essay, I realized that this was already too much like paragraph 3—luckily, by then, I'd thought of something else to say in paragraph 4.)*
P5: Conclusion

The instructions specifically ask me to “explain what effects the answers” would have on the argument. It’s not enough to ask the questions—I also have to state how various responses might help or hurt the argument. Note that I did not necessarily say, “If the answer is yes, then this will happen; if the answer is no, then that will happen.” It’s enough to say something like, “If X happens, this would support the hypothesis.” I did, though, make sure that some questions were presented in a way that allowed me to say, “If so, this strengthens the hypothesis,” and others were presented in a way that allowed me to say, “If so, this weakens the hypothesis.”

Essay:

The author provides two pieces of evidence in support of the researchers’ contention that workers without paid sick leave are more likely to work when ill, and that such workers are more likely to experience a job-related accident as a result. The results of the study cannot be disputed—we must accept as true, for example, that those with paid sick leave are significantly less likely to have work-related accidents than those without paid sick leave. We might, however, question whether the study was large enough, or representative enough, to draw broad conclusions. Further, the study does not demonstrate causation: it does not tie the incidence of work-related accidents to illness. While the researchers’ hypothesis is certainly one possibility, more research is needed to eliminate other possibilities and to bolster the strength of this argument.

The largest leap in the argument is the assumption that those without paid sick leave feel pressured to work when ill. No evidence is presented to establish this supposition. In order to strengthen this part of the argument, the researchers might ask study participants whether they have actually come to work ill during the same time frame covered by the original study and, if so, why they chose to come to work when ill. If the study participants who did experience a work-related accident were also more likely to come to work ill for fear of lack of pay, then the hypothesis would be much more strongly supported, particularly if this occurred with a correspondingly large proportion of workers (to match the 28% greater incidence of accidents in the original study).

The researchers would also strengthen their case by addressing alternative explanations for the data in the original study. For instance, are there differences between the two groups based upon industry or job

performed that might explain the data? For example, are hourly workers more likely to lack paid sick leave, while salaried workers are more likely to receive it? Are hourly workers more likely to work in blue-collar or more manual occupations, where on-the-job accidents are more frequent? If so, then we would expect a correlation between unpaid sick leave and a higher incidence of workplace accidents because the work itself is inherently more dangerous, not because people are choosing to work when ill. Further, if it is the case that higher-risk occupations in general are more likely to lack paid leave, then the second piece of evidence also loses its significance. In such a case, the researchers' hypothesis would be significantly weakened.

The data presented also lacks a depth of detail that would help us to evaluate the significance of the study results. How many people were surveyed? What is the margin of error and how was the study conducted? Is the 28% figure statistically significant? If the study represented a large enough survey group to extrapolate to the general population, across regions, industries, and job responsibilities, then the study results may be conveying something significant. If, alternatively, few people were surveyed or the incidence of job-related accidents were very low, then perhaps the 28% difference represented a small number of people, well within the statistical variance expected.

While the argument presents an interesting hypothesis, the data presented is not strong enough to establish the validity of the conclusion to even a small degree. First, at a basic level, we need to know whether the existing data is statistically significant and sufficiently representative. There are also several gaps in the logic chain, assertions made without supporting evidence. Finally, the researchers could strengthen their case by examining, and dismissing, alternative explanations for the data presented thus far. These steps might not be enough to establish the validity of the hypothesis beyond a doubt, but they would allow the researchers to determine whether the pursuit of the hypothesis is a good use of time, funds, and attention.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

Phew! Stacey has done a phenomenal job with this brutal Argument Essay. What makes it so hard? Well, the argument itself doesn't actually make a huge number of outright logical errors (e.g., "This burrito has guacamole, therefore it is the best burrito in Los Angeles!"). Instead, the majority of errors here are errors of *omission*. Stacey needs to use all the rules she knows about making a good argument in order to describe everything the author left out.

Generally, an Argument Essay presents you with a terrible argument, and it's up to you to explain why it's terrible. But in this case, the argument just isn't that bad as written. Thankfully, the prompt gives some hint of this. By asking what questions would need to be answered to justify the conclusion, it's more or less telling you that you'll need to consider things the prompt ignored. Make sure you take note of the special instructions on every essay, because they often provide helpful hints such as this one.

Honestly, I can't think of much I would do differently in this essay, though I do think Stacey missed one juicy low-hanging point. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is likely to have as its prime focus the desire to stop the spread of disease (it's not particularly interested in making sure random construction workers get good benefits). The best way to stop the spread of disease is to make sure sick people stay home, and the best way to get sick people to stay home is to ensure that they all get paid sick leave. Since the CDC's conclusion happens to coincide with that ulterior motive (getting sick people to stay home), we might have reason to doubt the CDC's conclusion.

Argument Topic #2

> The city council of Town X has proposed reducing the city's electric expenses by switching all the lights in public buildings from incandescent bulbs to light-emitting diodes (LEDs). The switch would be made gradually as the old incandescent bulbs burn out, and the city council reasons that since LED lights burn brighter and cost no more to purchase, the switch would help Town X save money on electrical costs in the future.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered to help evaluate the efficacy of the city council's proposal to save money on electrical costs. Be sure to explain how the answers to these questions would help to evaluate the council's prediction.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

As always, I read the prompt first, not the argument, so that I know what angles I need to take right from the start. This one's asking me to suggest "questions to help evaluate" the plan presented in the argument. I need to explain how the answers would help to evaluate the plan, not simply present the questions.

Great! My angle is “attack”—that is, I’m going to pick apart the plan, asking “Are you sure? Have you thought about XYZ? What about ABC? Is it really going to work that way?”

I also note that the prompt tells me what the goal is: “to save money on electrical costs.” Okay, now I dive into the argument. The first paragraph of my essay is going to summarize the argument, so my argument notes will go there (I type these notes in as I’m reading; they’ll become my outline). Then I start attacking, labeling all my questions P2, P3, or P4:

> P1: Goal: reduce electric cost. Plan: gradual switch from IB to LED. LED brighter, cost same to purchase.
> P2: Do they cost the same to use? Brighter, maybe use more energy? Do they last as long?
> P3: Can they just be switched out directly? Will the new bulbs fit the existing fixtures? Etc.
> P4: Other drawbacks? Unintended consequences?
> P5: Conclusion

My P5 note is standard—I always write “conclusion” (actually, “concl,” but I spelled out my notes above for you more than I would for myself) and worry about it later.

In this case, I notice that the argument offers no real “supporting” reasons to switch—but, hey, the new bulbs cost the same as the old ones. That doesn’t help me *save* money. Plus, the initial cost to purchase is only part of the total cost—what about the electricity bill? And then I’m off and running.

Notice that I did actually think to myself: okay, what’s the conclusion, and what evidence is the author trying to present in support of that conclusion? I can then ask myself, “Does each premise really support the conclusion?” and “Is the plan really going to work in the way that the author thinks?” In both cases, the answer is going to be no—I just have to figure out how each piece of the argument falls short.

Finally, I reminded myself that I need to have a neutral tone throughout. That is, I’m not trying to argue that the town council is wrong or its plan will not work; I’m simply pointing out flaws and indicating that the council has some more research to do in order to demonstrate that its plan is sound. I had to remind myself of that on this one because I think the town council’s plan actually does sound pretty bad!

Essay:

The council proposes reducing electric expenses by changing from one type of light bulb to another over time. While the council provides two reasons why this could help to save money, only one is a potential support (the fact that the new bulbs burn more brightly). The other reason, that the LED bulbs cost no more to purchase, does not help to save money; rather, it only shows that the town will not spend more money to purchase the bulbs. Further, the one supporting fact may or may not result in a cost savings—we don't have enough information to tell for sure.

The initial cost to purchase the new bulbs is the same, but this is only one of the costs associated with lighting. The bulk of the cost is incurred over time, as the bulbs are used. Do the new bulbs use the same amount of electricity to run? The argument mentions that they're brighter; perhaps they use more energy? If so, then the electrical costs could actually increase over time, not decrease—the opposite of what

the council expects. Further, do the new bulbs last as long as the old ones? If they last longer, then costs might decrease; if they burn out more quickly, however, then costs could increase.

The council's plan is to replace the incandescent bulbs with the new LEDs over time, as the old ones burn out. Is it possible to make a direct replacement without incurring any extra costs? Will the new bulbs fit into the old fixtures, and do they use the same type of electrical connection? If not, there could be a significant cost associated with retrofitting the fixtures in order to accommodate the new type of bulb—and that would be made more complicated by the plan to replace the bulbs gradually as they burn out. If one fixture has three incandescent bulbs, and one burns out, and if that fixture would need to be retrofitted in order to be able to take an LED, can you retrofit only one portion of the fixture? Likely not, so now, in addition to the cost of retrofitting, we will also be tossing out two perfectly good incandescent bulbs in order to switch to LEDs.

Finally, are there any other drawbacks associated with switching from the old bulbs to the new that might add to the costs or reduce the efficacy of the new bulbs? For instance, perhaps the new lights, which burn more brightly, also emit a larger amount of heat, which might cause the building to have to increase the usage of air conditioning, thereby increasing electricity costs (albeit from a different source). Possible unintended consequences need to be addressed before implementing such a plan, or the council might find itself with a surprise on its next electric bill.

The plan presented by the council includes just one piece of evidence intended to support the idea that electric costs will decrease, and even that piece of evidence is suspect (as we saw, the fact that the LEDs burn more brightly might mean that they actually use more energy!). While it may ultimately be the case that the plan is sound and will save Town X money, we cannot conclude this from the argument as it stands now. There are simply too many unexplored variables, including total cost, not just replacement cost, and possible drawbacks, including retrofitting or other unexpected consequences, that could actually result in increased costs.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

This is definitely NOT the only argument prompt I've read that says "B is better than A, so let's switch!" In fact, Topic #10 in this book also matches

this format. With any topic of this type, switching time and cost are issues, which Stacey hit on in great detail in paragraph 3.

There is also always a danger in switching from a known thing to an unknown thing, which Stacey addresses in paragraph 4.

If I had gotten this topic, I would have written a pretty similar essay—the topic writers build a small set of flaws into each argument for you to find, so good essays on the same Argument topic tend to be pretty similar. I don't think I would have thought of the thing about fixtures having multiple bulbs, though!

It does occur to me that certain types of lighting can trigger migraines in some people, so that makes me think that there might be more health consequences related to a new type of lighting. If sitting under sun lamps is a treatment for depression, maybe really unnatural types of light could have the opposite effect? I'm not saying that that's true—just that more study is needed.

Argument Topic #3

> Company X has just switched to a four-day workweek, mandating that employees work 10 hours per day from Monday to Thursday instead of 8 hours per day from Monday to Friday. Although the policy is new, Company X claims that the policy will help to increase profits by shutting down offices on Fridays and to boost employee morale by reducing commuting time to and from work each week.
>
> Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Stacey Koprince:

The instructions specifically ask me to address assumptions made in the argument, so I first typed "P1: Assumptions" and I also made a mental note to concentrate on that while I read the argument. Once I found the conclusion ("Company X claims that … "), I put it in my paragraph 1 notes, and then I started brainstorming what assumptions would lead to that conclusion.

The best way to brainstorm assumptions is to figure out what premise leads to a particular claim. In this case, the argument says that "shutting down offices" will lead to an "increase [in] profits." Hmm, well, I know that profits are calculated by subtracting costs from revenues. This premise says the costs are going to go down, so the author must be assuming that revenues are going to stay the same. Now, I just need to brainstorm a couple of possibilities for why revenues might not stay the same if the company is closed down every Friday.

Next, the argument says that "reducing commuting time" will "boost employee morale." Here, I immediately thought, "What if someone's commute time is 10 minutes? He or she really isn't going to care much about commute time." That led me to the basic assumption here: that commute time is a significant source of concern for the vast majority of employees—and that told me what to think about next! It's possible that working an 8-hour day is just fine but 10 hours crosses a line in some way. If someone needs to pick a child up from daycare, or get a child onto the school bus in the morning, that person is not going to be thrilled with extended work hours. I have a Tae Kwon Do class after work one night a week; they're not going to change the time or day of the class just to accommodate my new work schedule!

See what I did at the end there? I put myself into the argument. What if my

company were proposing this? Because the instructions specifically ask us to talk about what would happen “if the assumptions prove unwarranted,” I put my critical thinking cap on. Why would this be annoying or problematic for me? (If you think it’d be great for you, then imagine a friend who would have legitimate problems with the proposal.)

Here are my notes for the argument (note: I type my notes in and then I write paragraph by paragraph, erasing each line of notes as I go):

P1: Assumptions. Claim: increase profits, boost morale.
P2: Assumes commute time = major pain point. Maybe 10h per day = bad for morale (kids, after-work activities?).
P3: Assumes can make same revenues in 4 days as 5.
P4: Assumes they can just shut down on Fri. Customers? Deliveries? Etc.
P5: Conclusion

Essay:

Company X claims that switching to a four-day workweek will help the company to increase both profits and employee morale. While it is possible that the plan will work as stated, the company's argument depends upon several assumptions that may or may not be valid. It is possible that a four-day workweek will have no effect on profits; however, under certain circumstances, a four-day workweek could actually decrease profits. Further, while some employees will no doubt be thrilled to have a three-day weekend every week, others may not appreciate a 10-hour work day.

The company assumes that commute time is a significant "point of pain" for most of its employees, and that those employees would be happy to work 10 hours rather than 8 in order to avoid one day of commute time. The company fails to address, however, how a 10-hour workday might alter the schedules and lives of the employees outside of work. Let's assume that employees work a standard 8am to 5pm schedule. Now, employees will have to start earlier or work later (or both). Those with partners and/or children may find that this new schedule disrupts the family dinner or the before-school morning routine. Those who participate in regularly scheduled activities—an exercise routine, a sports match, a book club—may find their personal and social activities curtailed. If so, the new plan is not likely to improve employee morale.

The company believes that profits will increase because the company will reduce expenses associated with keeping the office open on Fridays. The company assumes, then, that it will make the same amount of revenue in four days that it typically makes in five. Perhaps the nature of the company's business allows this but it would be wise to validate this

assumption before proceeding. For instance, the business model might require salespeople to call on customers. What hours do those customers work? If it is very difficult to call on customers before 8am or after 5pm, then extending the hours for salespeople while cutting off one workday a week could actually result in decreased revenues. Alternatively, employees may be more mentally fatigued by the end of a 10-hour day and lose productivity; it's entirely possible that four 10-hour days will produce less work than five 8-hour days, though both add up to 40 hours.

This brings us to our final assumption: the company appears to believe that there are no negative consequences relative to shutting down completely on Fridays. Does the company ever field customer inquiries or have to provide support for its products and services? If so, customers will be unhappy if they cannot reach the company on Fridays. Does the company receive deliveries of any kind or have to interact with vendors or suppliers in any way? In such a case, Friday closures could impact the company's efficiency, which could in turn impact revenues, expenses, or morale.

Company X has developed an interesting idea that may be worth further exploration, but committing to such a plan immediately would be rash. There are a number of variables that need to be examined before concluding that the plan is likely to achieve the stated goals without resulting in (possibly quite negative) unintended consequences. It would be prudent for the company to determine, via direct dialogue with workers, what measures in general are likely to improve employee morale. Further, the company must carefully examine the possible financial consequences associated with spreading 40 hours of work over four days rather than five and with closing its offices entirely on a day when businesses are typically expected to be open.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

Great essay from Stacey here. You can see from her explanation of how she went about writing it that Stacey cares a lot about organization. The three major assumptions are listed in the introduction, and then you hit them one at a time in three nice long paragraphs. This is *always* the goal, as long as you can come up with enough material while you're outlining.

Notice how Stacey uses the real world without resorting to specific examples; this is a hallmark of a good Argument Essay. In the second paragraph, she brings up "an exercise routine, a sports match, a book club." These are simple, solid, real-world examples. There's no need to talk about specific companies, and you should try to avoid it, or you risk writing more about the issue than the argument itself. You should be able to hypothesize plenty of realistic situations ("employees may be more mentally fatigued by the end of a 10-hour day," "the business model might require salespeople to call on customers," etc.) without resorting to *actual* situations from history/current events. (Specific examples are great in the Issue Essay, but not so much in the Argument Essay.)

Stacey hits a million great points here, but you'd be surprised how much stuff is hidden inside each prompt. For example, Stacey did not mention the possibility that Friday is the most lucrative day of the week, and so losing it would be worse than losing another day. She also never discusses the fact that when people are forced onto a different schedule than most of their friends and family, that free time might not be worth as much. These aren't mistakes, by the way, as Stacey found *plenty* of great stuff to talk about here. It's just a reminder that essay prompts always provide more than enough material for you to write a solid three-paragraph essay.

Argument Topic #4

Five years ago, the local university built two new dormitories through different contractors: Aleph Construction and Gimmel Builders. The buildings were nearly identical, though it cost Gimmel Builders approximately 20% more to construct its dormitory. Aleph's dormitory, however, has required approximately 10% more in maintenance costs per year over the past five years. Therefore, to construct another new dormitory with the lowest overall cost, the local university should hire Aleph Construction.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions in the expert's claim. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Chris Berman:

No matter how the stimulus is phrased, a successful essay must correctly identify the conclusion and evidence topics. Usually, I note any central assumptions. Here, the stimulus expressly asks that I do so. Also, the specific question asks that the response discuss the implications if the assumptions are flawed—so, I must essentially note how to weaken the argument. The structure here is classic of the GRE. The premises involve percentages. Almost always with such a structure, there are flawed assumptions concerning the relationship between the percentages and actual numbers. This argument contains some other assumptions to question—for example, the supposed lifespan of the structures and the meaning of "nearly identical," to name two. Here are the notes for my response:

1. Identify the structural features of the argument
2. Identify the questionable assumptions
3. Note how those assumptions, if unwarranted, would weaken the conclusion

Essay:

The argument concludes that Aleph is the more cost efficient contractor because its building cost was a substantial percent less than the competition's, even though its maintenance costs were higher than Gimmel's, albeit by a smaller percentage. Besides the assumption that the facts are accurate, this argument hinges on several other assumptions of dubious currency. Most strikingly, the argument assumes that a lower percentage automatically indicates a lower numerical cost. This is mathematically untenable. The author merely assumes that the maintenance base price is low enough that a smaller percentage indicates a smaller cost. If this is incorrect, the conclusion becomes erroneous. Furthermore, the argument apparently assumes that the lifespan of these buildings is not long enough for the additional maintenance costs to outweigh the construction savings. A miscalculation here would also completely undermine the conclusion.

While the aforementioned assumptions are certainly enough to question the validity of the conclusion, this argument contains several other quite possibly unwarranted assumptions. First, the author assumes

that the contractors' prices have not changed in the interim. Additionally, the argument states that the buildings are "nearly identical," but the author only assumes that those implied small differences do not account for the difference in price. Furthermore, the argument takes for granted that the costs of all other features of the buildings—the land, zoning costs, transportation, etc.—were identical. Another unsupported assumption is that the maintenance costs will not change. Similarly, the author blithely relates the higher maintenance costs to the contractor without providing evidence that the costs do not result from unrelated factors. Finally, the argument supposes that there is no other contractor that would prove the least costly of all.

This litany of unsupported assumptions seriously jeopardizes the certainty of the conclusion. If any one of the suppositions contained in the argument proved false, the conclusion would be factually wrong, as Aleph would then not be the most cost efficient option.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

I like that we've included in this book a shorter essay that still covers all the bases! Our instructors can tend to be a bit long-winded.

While my own Argument Essays tend to follow a set structure (short intro, three body paragraphs, short conclusion), and I tend to shoehorn whatever I have to say into that structure (if I have eight problems with the argument, I will logically group them into about three body paragraphs), Chris here sticks *exactly* to the instructions, which ask about assumptions. So he gives us a "litany" of them, and ends with a strong conclusion: "If any one of the suppositions contained in the argument proved false, the conclusion would be factually wrong."

I think that the structure Chris used here, in which he introduces many of his arguments in the introduction, might be a bit risky. In less adept hands, this could look unplanned or disorganized, although Chris makes it work nicely.

When in doubt in your own writing, I'd stick to "one main point per paragraph."

Argument Topic #5

> Airline industry representatives have recently argued that flying is safer than driving, citing two separate studies. First, U.S. statistics show that each year there are approximately 40,000 deaths in automobile accidents versus only approximately 200 in flight accidents. Second, studies indicate that pilots are four times less likely than average to have accidents on the road.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to determine whether the argument is reasonable. Be sure to explain what effects the answers to these questions would have on the validity of the argument.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Daniel Yudkin:

Crucial to writing a strong Argument essay is to refer consistently to the key words mentioned in the given prompt. The prompt in this case asks me to discuss which "questions would need to be answered" to make the argument more "reasonable," and what effect their answers would have on the argument's "validity." Keeping these key points in mind, I can turn to specifics.

What is wrong with this argument? At first blush, it may seem convincing to learn that so few people die in flight compared to in automobile accidents. This is indeed a strong start to an argument, but it is missing a key ingredient, a “question” that needs to be “answered” in order for this statistic to make any sense. I need to know more than objective quantities; I need to know *proportions*. To know that only 200 people die in planes isn’t enough—I need to know what *fraction* this is of the entire amount. Suppose only 200 people took planes every year, and every single one of them died. Flying doesn’t sound quite as safe anymore, does it? Therefore, an important question to be answered involves the total number of people who drive and fly every year.

Turning to the second supporting sentence, I learn that pilots are safer-than-average drivers. Of course, what this doesn’t tell me is anything about how safe they are in the air. Therefore, in order for this sentence to add to the argument’s validity, I would need to know the extent to which being a safe driver makes you a safe flier. Now, even with

this information, I still wouldn't know what impact this would have for the average airplane passenger—but at least it would be a start. My essay itself will explore this topic further.

One final question that may not be worth mentioning in the essay but is important to keep in mind is where the statistics came from—in other words, were the studies cited from reliable, reputable sources? Or were they conducted by organizations that had a vested interest in proving a particular point? When all else fails—when the argument seems sound and you're having trouble pinpointing its flaws—this is always a good idea to fall back on.

I can construct my essay now using my first two issues as the skeleton, expanding and using examples to illustrate these points, and taking care to refer repeatedly to the specific issues raised in the prompt. These are the questions from my notes:

Questions:

What is the relative proportion of deaths per year between driving and flying?
To what extent does being a good driver make a good pilot?

Essay:

The purpose of the airline industry's argument, elucidated in the passage above, is to convince the reader that flying is safer than driving. The industry representatives cite two pieces of evidence to support their conclusion—first, that fewer people die per year in flight; second, that airline pilots get into fewer driving accidents. To show that these arguments are reasonable, several questions need to be answered. The first question has to do with the proportion of deaths represented by the figures of annual deaths; the second has to do with the degree to which being a safe driver translates into being a safe pilot.

Suppose the CEO of a car company tried to convince shareholders that the company was succeeding in a marketing campaign to sell a certain kind of car by saying that over 10,000 cars had sold since the campaign began. The obvious question on the shareholders' minds should be the fraction of the total number of cars sold that this figure represents. If 10,000 cars represents less than 1% of the entire market on cars for this period, presumably they would not be very pleased with the campaign. Similarly, knowing that only 200 people, versus 40,000 people, died in

flight versus on the road is not informative until we know the proportion of the total number of fliers and drivers that these numbers represent. If far fewer people fly than drive, 200 could represent a large fraction of all fliers. And if the proportion of flight-deaths is higher than the proportion of car-deaths, then regardless of the total number, it would be fair to say that flying is not safer than driving. The question that needs to be answered, in other words, is how many people fly and drive each year. This would then allow us to calculate the portion of the total that these figures represent.

Turning to the second piece of evidence used to support the argument that flying is safer than driving, we learn that airline pilots are safer-than-average drivers, having four times fewer accidents than the norm. In order for this fact to be convincing, several questions would need to be answered. First of all, we would need to know whether being a safe driver translates into being a safe pilot. But more than this, we would need to know what being a safe pilot *means*. Keep in mind that we are solely evaluating the argument that flying is safe *relative to driving*. So knowing that pilots are "safe fliers" is nonsensical unless we can evaluate that claim in the context of driving. Therefore, a question that needs to be answered to make this argument valid is what having a "safe pilot" means for airline passengers. An example of an answer to

this question that would make the argument more valid would be that for any given hour of flight, pilots are vastly less likely to crash than for a given hour of driving. This is quite clearly a long distance away from the statement as initially phrased—evidence that the argument as-is is in need of serious revision.

In sum, we see in this passage the beginnings of a coherent argument, but more information is needed in order to fully evaluate the strength of the claims. Namely, we would need to know what fractions 200 and 40,000 represent of the entire population of fliers and drivers, respectively, and also what implications being a safe driver has for being a safe airline pilot.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Some Argument prompts present you with frankly *ridiculous* arguments. Flying is safer because pilots are safer *drivers*? On what planet does that make any sense?! Don't toss aside your initial feeling of "What the heck?!" A ridiculous premise is like a gift from the GRE—you can easily write a whole paragraph (as Daniel did) about how pilots being safe drivers is not the same as flying being safer. Daniel adeptly points out that *even if* being a safe driver were highly correlated with being a safe pilot, it's not clear that having a safe pilot makes air travel all that safe (what if there's a tropical storm, or the plane's wings fall off?).

Note also that Daniel adopts a very natural structure here—the prompt gave two reasons why flying is supposedly safer. Daniel wrote an intro, a large body paragraph about each of those two reasons, and a short conclusion.

Finally, always check the instructions that come with your topic. The instructions here ask you to "discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to determine whether the argument is reasonable." Accordingly, Daniel's tone is more like "Here is exactly what information we would need," rather than "This argument is stupid." The graders like you to sound balanced, thoughtful, and reasonable.

Argument Topic #6

In a laboratory study of two different industrial cleansers, CleanAll was found to remove 40% more dirt and kill 30% more bacteria than the next best cleanser. Furthermore, a study showed that employees working at buildings cleaned with CleanAll used far fewer sick days than employees working in buildings cleaned with other cleansers. Therefore, to prevent

employee illness, all companies should use CleanAll as their industrial cleanser.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Daniel Yudkin:

Typically, when you are asked to examine the assumptions that drive an argument, you are presented with certain pieces of evidence that do not totally add up to the final conclusion. The job, then, is to point out which pieces of evidence are missing that would be necessary to generate the conclusion. This argument, states that all companies should adopt CleanAll. The reasons for this are that it's more effective than the "next best cleanser" and that when it's adopted employees seem to take fewer sick days.

The phrase “next best cleanser” should be a dead giveaway of a great discussion target. Since no objective standards are cited, I don’t know if this cleanser is the second worst, or what. Next, the fact that employees take fewer “sick days” is insufficient evidence of the efficacy of the cleanser; there could be a variety of other causes for this. Finally, there may be other considerations that companies have in which cleanser they use, so even if the above two assumptions were satisfied, it wouldn’t necessarily warrant the conclusion.

Here is my outline:

Assumptions

- “Next best cleanser” is something important.
- “Sick days” are a significant indicator of cleanliness.
- Effectiveness warrants adoption.

I will systematically describe these assumptions in my essay, taking care to indicate, as the prompt requests, the implications for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Essay:

In this argument, the author suggests that all companies should adopt CleanAll as their industrial cleanser. This is based on several facts that the author cites. The argument depends, however, on certain additional assumptions which are not explicitly stated and which, should they prove unfounded, may critically weaken the final conclusion.

For example, the author references the fact that CleanAll performed better than the next best cleanser in a laboratory study of two industrial cleansers. Before this piece of evidence can be used to support the argument that CleanAll should be adopted by all companies, several things need to be established. First of all, it is important to know the origin of this study. Is the organization that performed this study reliable? The argument assumes that it is, but if it is not this would greatly weaken its thrust. Additionally, and importantly, we are never told what this “next best cleanser” is. Suppose that CleanAll was the second-worst industrial cleanser. If it were compared with the worst cleanser, it may very well boast the same facts that it removes more dirt and bacteria. In order for this claim to have weight, then, it is crucial to know the scope of the comparison. As is, the assumption that this comparison cleanser is high-quality is unsupported.

Another assumption on which the argument depends is the notion that sick days are a valid measure of the effectiveness of an industrial cleaner. The study demonstrates that the employees of companies using CleanAll take far fewer sick days. But we must not jump immediately to the conclusion that this differences was *caused* by the effectiveness of CleanAll. Were the two companies randomly selected? Were other possible variables controlled for? And finally, does fewer sick days mean a better cleaner? As is, the argument assumes that each of these is the case—for if any of these *weren't* the case, it would be unwarranted to jump to the final conclusion that *all* companies should adopt the cleaner.

The final assumption the argument makes is that a sweeping claim can be made from limited evidence. Suppose that all the assumptions stated above were indeed correct—that CleanAll performed better than leading cleansers, not just low-quality ones, and that its use in a company does indeed cause employees to take fewer sick days. Even if these were all the case, it wouldn't necessarily indicate that all companies should adopt the product. Perhaps there are other considerations that influence companies' choices. Price is one example. Perhaps CleanAll is much more expensive than competitors. Even such seemingly

inane factors as scent could influence companies' choice as to whether they should use CleanAll. In short, the argument assumes that sick days and dirt removal account for the entirety of the factors influencing companies' decision in which cleanser to adopt; if these assumptions prove unwarranted the argument will have far fewer grounds to stand on in its conclusions.

In sum, while the evidence cited in this argument does provide initial reasons to believe that CleanAll is a superior cleanser, the argument's conclusion rests on other assumptions—namely, that the cleaning studies it cites are valid and reliable, that the use of "sick days" is an appropriate measure of cleanser effectiveness, and that companies care about only these two things. Without concrete evidence that these assumptions can be satisfied, we must remain skeptical.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

This well-written, well-argued, and well-organized essay really hits all the marks!

Personally, it kind of occurred to me that killing *all* the bacteria isn't necessarily a plus for a cleaning product. Apparently (according to what I read in the news, anyway) excessive use of antibacterial products is causing resistant superbugs to evolve! These bugs could kill us all! And couldn't harsh cleaning products also aggravate people's allergies, chemical sensitivities, etc.? (Some offices actually ban perfume for this reason.)

Anyway, that's just my personal brainstorming—Daniel's essay certainly has more than enough to go on. I loved the point that performing better than the "next best" cleanser could just mean your product is second-worst. Daniel also astutely points out that cleaning power isn't the only determinant of which product is best for a particular buyer. After all, it's an office building, not an operating room.

Argument Topic #7

Downtown Zurzi is becoming increasingly congested with traffic, increasing commuting time for those who work downtown or near downtown. The nearby city of Loft was faced with the same problem several years ago and implemented a small weekly tax for driving one's car downtown. Downtown traffic almost immediately subsided in Loft and the local government also raised much-needed money for fixing roads elsewhere. Obviously, this plan should be implemented in Zurzi in

order to solve the brewing traffic congestion problem.

Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Daniel Yudkin:

When I read an Argument topic that makes a comparison, the first thing I think about is the degree to which that comparison is warranted. Sure enough, with this argument topic, I will be spending much of my time discussing the ways in which Zurzi and Loft may differ in their respective traffic situations. Because many assumptions are built into the notion that what works well for Loft will work well for Zurzi, this is a rich issue for discussion.

A second common assumption made in Argument topics is that something is a *good thing*. In this case, the argument assumes that it is a good thing that "traffic almost immediately subsided in Loft" and the town "raised much-needed money for fixing roads elsewhere." Of course, there may be downsides to these incidents, which I'll have to address in the essay.

The prompt asks me to discuss the "specific evidence" needed to decide whether the argument is good or bad, and how that evidence might strengthen or weaken the argument. With the above two thoughts in mind, I can now make a clear sketch of which issues my essay is going to address:

Comparison (Loft & Zurzi)

- Is the driving population the same?
- Is the downtown traffic situation the same?

Good Thing?

- Did the lack of traffic deprive local business owners of customers?
- Could those who paid the tax afford to pay it?
- Did the traffic simply move elsewhere, congesting other areas?

I now have five decent nuggets from which to craft an Argument Essay. I can start with a general introduction and then move on to discuss the specific examples in the subsequent paragraphs, making sure to point out how each example is directly relevant to the prompt. Then I will round it off with a conclusion that summarizes the points.

Essay:

We learn in the above argument that a town, Zurzi, is confronted with a traffic problem, and we learn how another town, Loft, dealt with this problem. We are asked to subscribe to the notion that since Loft's efforts to curtail traffic were effective, Zurzi should enact similar measures. In order to better evaluate this argument, additional evidence is needed, falling generally into the categories of whether Loft's efforts were indeed effective, and, even if this is the case, whether there is reason to believe that Zurzi will enjoy similar success were it to follow suit.

Were Loft's efforts effective? To answer this question we would need to know more about the side effects of its actions. There are several possible negative side effects that could have occurred as a result of

Loft's implementing a tax on cars that enter the downtown area. For example, if traffic is suddenly avoiding that area because of the tax, where is it going? Are people simply driving less, or have they merely moved to another part of town? Evidence showing that traffic is simply bypassing that area and congesting another part of town would weaken the argument. Additionally, we may want to know *who* this tax is most affecting. In many cities, people who live on the outskirts of town are less able to afford the more expensive real estate in the city center. They then drive to work downtown. If this is the case in Loft, then the tax may be putting financial strain on those who cannot afford it, but have no other choice. If we were to find evidence that this was the case, this would weaken the argument that Zurzi should enact a similar plan. Finally, another important side effect of the tax may be the impact on local business owners. If suddenly traffic downtown is drastically curtailed, local business owners may find themselves with a precipitous decline in business. Evidence to this effect would serve to undermine the original statement.

We turn next to the second big assumption of the prompt, which is that Zurzi should do as Loft does. Suppose we find evidence that Loft's measures were indeed successful—that traffic patterns aren't harmfully disrupted, that the tax isn't too great a financial burden, and that business owners are enjoying, say, an increasing influx of pedestrian clientele. Does this imply that Zurzi should necessarily do in kind? Not until we have evidence that Zurzi's situation is comparable to Loft's. For example, we would need to know whether Zurzi's driving population is the same, both geographically and financially, as Loft's. Just because Loft's drivers can afford to pay that tax doesn't mean that Zurzi's can—we need more information to confirm that this the case. Additionally, as with Loft, we would need evidence indicating that businesses are subject to similar conditions. Evidence to this effect—namely, evidence indicating that Zurzi faces conditions similar to Loft—would strengthen, and indeed are necessary to the logical thrust of, the argument.

In summary, we see two main pillars of evidence that would need to be established in order to better evaluate the argument. First, we'd need evidence that Loft's efforts were successful. Second, we'd need evidence that Zurzi is like Loft. With such confirming evidence, the argument begins to cohere. Without it, the argument is bereft of critical foundations.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Great essay, Daniel! Any time you get a GRE essay topic that makes an analogy, you can pretty much write a whole essay (if you have to) about what a bad analogy it is. For Argument Essay purposes, all analogies are terrible analogies!

Daniel's third paragraph covers in detail all the things we'd need to know about Loft and Zurzi to make sure that what worked in Loft would be likely to work in Zurzi. Daniel's substantial second paragraph about the possible side effects of the plan makes for a very thorough essay. I especially liked the closing about the argument's being "bereft of critical foundations."

Argument Topic #8

In last year's mayoral election in Town T, candidate Miller led candidate Keating by a substantial margin in the polls leading up to the election. At the last minute, Keating launched a widely viewed series of television advertisements that focused on preserving the natural environment of Town T, a topic neglected by Miller. Subsequently, Keating won the

election by a narrow margin. This year, if candidate Miller hopes to win the upcoming mayoral election, he must increase his coverage of the topic of preserving the natural environment of Town T.

Write a response in which you examine the stated and/or unstated assumptions of the argument. Be sure to explain how the argument depends on these assumptions and what the implications are for the argument if the assumptions prove unwarranted.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

This is a nice, long argument topic. I generally find that the more words there are in the prompt, the more problems there are in the argument, which is good news if you want to pull together three solid body paragraphs. Remember that your thesis on any Argument Essay is more or less the same: "While the author comes to a plausible conclusion, the argument made to reach that conclusion is flawed."

My goal is to find three problems with this argument. Remember that they have been purposely placed in the prompt, so all I have to do is locate them. The first one I can see is that an error with time is being made here. Just because an issue is problematic one year doesn't mean it will be problematic another year. The natural environment issue may already have been resolved.

The next problem has to do with the comparison between the two elections. In the previous election, Miller went up against Keating and lost. But the prompt doesn't say that Miller is going up against Keating again. Miller's new opponent may have no plans to focus on that issue, or his opponent may have already staked out that territory early in the campaign.

The final problem I see is that a causal relationship has been implied between the TV ads and Miller's loss, yet this could just be a correlation. Miller could have lost for some other reason. I don't love this particular flaw, so I'm going to leave it for last. You should always do your best to find three flaws, but if one of them feels weak, leave it for last. Your reader will often begin to skim at the end if they think you're going strong.

Here's my outline:

Thesis: Author comes to decent conclusion, argument no good.

I. Issues are not the same every election.

II. Candidates are not the same/polling situation not the same.

III. No definitive evidence given that TV ads were deciding factor.

Essay:

The prompt above describes a mayoral election between Miller and Keating that Miller lost soon after a particular TV ad was run. From this, the author derives a conclusion about what Miller should do to win the election this year. In coming to this conclusion, the author makes a number of unfounded assumptions that undermine the validity of the argument. These assumptions are based on faulty comparisons—between candidates, topical issues, and other contextual elements—and a mistaking of correlation for causation. If the author wants to support his conclusion, he would need to provide evidence proving that these two elections are comparable, and that Miller's loss can factually be attributed to its implied cause.

The first error made by the author is in implying that just because an

issue was topically relevant during one election, it will necessarily be relevant during the next election. For all we know, the natural environment could have been a major issue in the previous election because of some climatic issue, such as saving a particular waterway or passing a specific law to protect local wetlands, that has since been resolved (during Keating's mayoralty, for example, which would make logical sense given that she ran on a preservationist platform). If the author wants to make this connection, he would need to provide evidence that the natural environment remains a hot-button issue that could decide the election one way or another.

The next faulty assumption in the argument also involves a comparison, namely between Miller and whoever his opponent is. The prompt seems to imply that Miller will be going up against Keating again, but there's no evidence to support this. This matters, because if Miller is running against a different candidate, then there's no reason to believe a strategy that would have served him well against Keating would still be useful. For example, he could be running against a park ranger, who will always be able to beat him on issues relevant to the natural environment, in which case increasing his coverage of those

issues would be a waste of time. To fix this assumption, the author would need to tell us definitively that Miller is running against Keating again (or a very similar candidate).

Another major assumption the argument makes is in deciding that the television ads Keating ran were the sole or even primary reason that Miller lost the first election. This is a causation/correlation error, in that we have no reason to believe the two things didn't simply happen separately, rather than one causing the other. It's just as likely that Miller committed some terrible faux pas near the end of the election, and that turned out to be more of a deciding factor than the television ads. The author needs to provide evidence that the primary impetus behind so many people changing their vote between the time of the polling showing Miller in the lead and Keating's win was the television ads.

It's certainly plausible that Miller might fare better in the next election if he pays attention to a subject he is said to have neglected. However, we cannot know that for certain unless the author provides definitive evidence that the issue of environmental preservation is still in the forefront of constituents' minds, that Miller and Keating are the two candidates in the next election, and that the television ads and the issue they underscored were the primary reason Miller lost his lead in the previous election. With this information in place, the author's conclusion becomes not just plausible, but convincing.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

I was especially interested in Tommy's comment that his thesis is always pretty much, "While the author comes to a plausible conclusion, the argument made to reach that conclusion is flawed." Mine is always something like, "This argument has numerous logical flaws, rests on many unwarranted assumptions, and would be improved with the addition of more information." In other words, Tommy's approach is more middle-ground, and mine is more, "This argument is awful."

Tommy's approach works very well in this essay. We're certainly not called on to argue that Miller should *not* campaign on environmental issues—just that there are gaps in the particular reasoning presented in the argument for this conclusion.

Argument Topic #9

Last year PrepUp had record enrollment in its test prep courses, but

yearly profits fell by nearly 30%. In contrast, TopPreparation had comparable enrollment to the year before, with profits rising by approximately 20%. This discrepancy most likely results from the fact that PrepUp teaches only live, in-person classes, which require expensive rental spaces and teaching equipment. Although TopPreparation's total enrollment remained unchanged, its online enrollment increased by 50%, and online classes have much lower overhead costs. In order to address these issues of profitability in the coming year, PrepUp will begin offering online test prep courses.

Write a response in which you discuss what questions would need to be answered in order to decide whether PrepUp's plan for the coming year and the argument on which it is based are reasonable. Be sure to explain how the answers to these questions would help to evaluate the plan.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Jesse Cotari:

The topic of this Argument Essay provides both advantages and risks for me. On the upside, I've recently been doing loads of business case studies that focus on profits, revenues, and competitive advantage. This means that I have a lot of familiarity with the types of analytical frameworks that go into tackling this type of situation, and hence loads of ideas! But this presents a number of risks. A bevy of ideas can be a burden when writing a timed essay, so it's going to be essential to brainstorm quickly, group common ideas together, prioritize the best, and discard the second-tier ideas. Furthermore, I felt the distinct draw to attack this problem as a business case, and not as an AWA essay. However, doing this the AWA way means identifying and focusing on the logical flaws in the argument, not just examining the issues involved in making a proper business decision. The last risk was jargon. Dropping a term like "allocated fixed cost" into the argument without definition is going to irritate a grader (with good reason). On the other hand, defining terms can eat up vital time and make an essay's logic drag. To attack this essay effectively therefore means keeping the *ideas* behind the jargon in mind while staying clear of any particularly economic or financial terms.

My first bit of processing is to outline the argument, to get a sense for the flow and identify common logical errors:

> PrepUp had "record enrollment" whereas TopPrep had unchanged numbers.
>
> PU:
> High enrollment, dropping profits
> Live in-person classes
> Expensive rental spaces
> Expensive teaching equipment
>
> TP:
> Same enrollment → 20% rise in profits
> 50% rise in online classes

The key flaws I see here are a lack of quantification (we're given percents, not numbers), vague terms ("record enrollment"?), "correlation isn't causation," and issues of "skill and will." I also have an idea that relates the sizes of the companies, the initial investment required for an online teaching system, and the comparative per-student cost of that initial investment. However, despite the fact that it's probably a solid idea, I dump it because I

realize that the verbiage and chains of logic necessary to make the point would slow me down and potentially reduce the overall flow of the essay. I decide to lump lack of quantification and vague terms into one issue, and come up with the following outline:

Intro
Lack of numbers (% vs $)
Correlation is not causation: Profitability and in-person classes
Even if: Skill and will: Investment, training, → profit
Wrap up

(I always like having an “even if” in the chain of my argument. It’s usually my third body paragraph. At that point in my essay, I’ve pointed out a number of flaws in the logic. Then I say, *even if you fixed all of these problems, you* ***still*** *wouldn’t be able to make your argument work.*)

Outline in hand (actually, typed on the screen, to be deleted at the end), the last thing I do is always to reread the prompt. Noting that it says “questions … to be answered,” I make a mental note to phrase the essay in those terms, and begin writing.

With two minutes left, I go back and make a few last checks. In my fervor of ripping up the argument, I notice that I neglected to phrase “logical omissions” as “questions to be answered,” so I fix that. I make my intro a little more pointed. The last thing I do is be sure to copy–paste to fix the places where I abbreviated TopPreparation as “TP.”

Essay:

At first glance, the recommendation appears obvious: If TopPreparation’s business model is yielding large increases in profit, PrepUp should emulate this business model to improve profitability. However, the logic of the argument as it stands is utterly incomplete, and there are major questions that need to be answered before deciding whether undertaking a plan of offering online courses makes sense for PrepUp.

The first area of deficit in the argument lies in the numbers, or rather, in their absence. All of the profits are stated in percent increases or decreases, with no initial values to start from. If PrepUp had been insanely profitable in previous years, whereas TopPreparation barely made ends meet, emulating TopPreparation’s business model would be unwise. It would be essential to determine the starting profitability of both businesses to make any comparison.

A second major question stems from the assumed connection between increased enrollment and decreased profits at PrepUp. To make this connection, we would need to answer the question of whether per-student costs have actually increased. Without knowing the underlying causes, increased enrollment could positively or negatively affect profits, or could have absolutely no relationship to their present decline. If new classes have been held in new, more expensive classrooms, increasing enrollment could have indeed led to increased costs and the decline of profits. On the other hand, if increased enrollment has led to increases in average class sizes, the per-student cost would have actually gone down, while per-student income would have remained the same, leading to an increase in per-student profitability. It is equally possible that profits have declined because costs unrelated to instruction have increased.

Perhaps the CEO decided to increase her pay by a large percentage. Perhaps PrepUp invested in new IT infrastructure. Without knowing the breakdown of the current income and expenses, it is impossible to impute the profitability decline solely to the expense of in-person teaching.

Even if PrepUp and TopPreparation were initially producing comparable profits, and increasing enrollment in classes has pushed up per-student costs, there is still a major question to be answered: How much is the new system going to cost compared to how much it will save? Development, implementation and personnel training are required for the roll-out of any new system, and these things are not free; there will likely be a large initial investment required to implement such a system. While “much lower overhead” sounds like an attractive goal, a savings of $10,000 per year for a system that costs $100,000 to implement would imply a minimum 10-year timeline for recovery of the initial investment. Without knowing the initial investment required to implement a new online system, it is impossible to assess the overall contribution to cost savings.

All told, while the online teaching system does appear attractive, exact quantitative data is lacking in the argument. Without a basis to compare the two companies, and without understanding the current drivers of profitability and the costs of the new system, it is impossible to properly evaluate the argument in favor of online classes.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

I enjoyed Jesse's strategy of always having an "even if" in the chain of the argument—in Jesse's case, in the third body paragraph.

A sophisticated Argument Essay doesn't just say, "Everything in the prompt is wrong." Rather, it addresses *relationships* among the components of the argument. Jesse writes two full paragraphs about problems in comparing TopPreparation and PrepUp, and then says that *even if* the comparisons are valid and the assumptions true, the cost of switching might *still* eliminate any advantage to the plan to switch.

Note that Jesse doesn't come out against PrepUp's plan—he concludes that "the online teaching system does appear attractive," but that much more quantitative data is needed. Because Jesse has gone into great detail about *exactly* what data we would need, this conclusion is persuasive.

Argument Topic #10

> Cot-Ten, a cotton production company, has recently faced profitability issues based on the use of Chemical X in its manufacturing process. The main by-product produced when using Chemical X is covered under stringent environmental regulations, making it very difficult and expensive to dispose of. A similar processing product, Chemical Y, has recently been discovered, and can be used by Cot-Ten at a minimal cost of switching. The CEO of Cot-Ten has declared that the company will increase profits by switching to Chemical Y by the end of the month.
>
> Write a response in which you discuss what specific evidence is needed to evaluate the argument and explain how the evidence would weaken or strengthen the argument.

Here's a take on this topic—followed by an actual essay—from Manhattan Prep instructor Jennifer Dziura:

Let's run through this argument: Disposing of Chemical X (well, the by-product of Chemical X) is expensive and is hurting profits.

But Chemical Y has just been discovered! Cot-Ten can use Chemical Y instead. (Hmmn, sketchy. Brand-new chemicals kind of freak me out. Maybe our clothes will start giving us cancer!)

We are then told that the cost of switching will be minimal. Um, okay, but that's hardly the point! Tell me something—anything!—about this mysterious Chemical Y!

OMG, so many unanswered questions! Such as:

- Are there also “stringent environmental regulations” about Chemical Y? (Or is it likely that there *will* be, since Chemical Y is new?) Or regulations on its by-products?
- Does Chemical Y *have* by-products? If so, are there *more* by-products? For instance, maybe it costs less per pound to dispose of Chemical Y’s byproducts, but maybe Chemical Y makes *way more overall by-products,* so that the overall cost is higher.
- Does it cost more to *buy* Chemical Y in the first place???
- Is the cotton made with Chemical Y just as good? Might REVENUES go down even as expenses are slashed? THERE ARE TWO SIDES TO PROFIT: revenue and expenses, and revenue is kind of the more important one!
- Are there other reasons profits might not increase? Are consumers opposed to this relatively unknown new chemical? (I am! And this isn’t even real!)

Okay, this is plenty for me to get started writing, especially since the instructions ask me to talk about "what specific evidence is needed." Easy! I know I need to shoehorn these points into three body paragraphs, but since my bullet points above have a lot of overlap … I'm just going to start writing and see how it goes. After I write the body paragraphs, I'll go back and revise my introduction to make sure my thesis reflects what I actually talked about.

Also—very important—I want to make sure that I stay ON-TOPIC. Keep in mind that writing a paragraph about how Chemical Y might destroy the environment and kill all the wildlife and give everyone diseases would NOT help me score well on this essay. In fact, this point would be IRRELEVANT, because the argument's conclusion is that Cot-Ten will be able to *increase its profits* (not just "do good stuff") by switching. So, if I wanted to argue that the new chemical might have all kinds of bad effects, I need to tie those bad effects back into "profitability," such as by pointing out that poisoning people is bad for the bottom line.

Essay:

In response to its profitability problems, cotton production company Cot-Ten intends to switch from Chemical X, which requires expensive disposal of its by-products, to Chemical Y. However, Chemical Y is a truly unknown actor in this drama. To evaluate the argument at hand, we need far more information about Chemical Y, its by-products and disposal processes, its cost, and its efficacy in producing saleable cotton. Otherwise, Cot-Ten will be moving from a profitability deficit to a total unknown that could very well prove worse.

The reason provided for Cot-Ten's switch from Chemical X is that the by-product of that chemical falls under strict environmental regulations, and is thus expensive to dispose, thus impacting Cot-Ten's profitability. Then we are told that the newly discovered Chemical Y is "similar." Similar in what ways? Presumably, the chemical serves the same function in the manufacturing process, but the argument has done nothing to assure us that Chemical Y is not, in fact, similar in terms of environmental regulations and disposal costs. What if Chemical Y is actually more expensive to dispose of? To properly evaluate Cot-Ten's plans, we need to know how much by-product, if any, Chemical Y produces, and the cost and difficulty of that by-product's disposal. In order to know that, it would be helpful to know whether Chemical Y falls under any environmental regulations or whether—since Chemical Y

is new—such environmental regulations are likely to be passed in the near future. In order to calculate any cost savings, we would also need to know whether the manufacturing process would use the same amount of Chemical Y as it did of Chemical X (even if Chemical Y's by-products are cheaper to dispose of, pound-for-pound, if much more Chemical Y is needed or if Chemical Y yields far more by-product, this cost savings could be easily canceled out).

Keep in mind, however, that the argument's conclusion relates not just to cutting expenses, but to profitability overall. What if the switch to Chemical Y causes revenue to fall? We are told that Chemical Y is a "similar processing product," but will the cotton produced with this chemical be identical (or better)? Even if the product produced is technically the same, will consumers be aware of the switch? If so, would

they have any reason to doubt the new product's quality or otherwise be opposed to the switch? The same factors that might cause environmental regulations to be levied against Chemical Y, as they were against Chemical X, could also cause environmentally conscious consumers to oppose the new product, thus lowering revenues.

If it turned out that Chemical Y were truly an innocuous alternative to Chemical X, that it cost less to dispose of Chemical Y's by-products, and that consumers would purchase the new product for at least the same price and frequency as the old product, then the argument would be immeasurably strengthened. However, if Chemical Y were to have the same problems—high disposal costs due to environmental regulations—or introduce other costs, or if it were to reduce revenues, then the argument's conclusion would be unjustified. While Cot-Ten executives may have scored a coup by locating a cost-saving alternative, much research must be done before these executives can be congratulated. Whether Cot-Ten's profitability will rise, and whether switching from Chemical X to Chemical Y is a wise move, remains to be seen.

Here is a second opinion from Manhattan Prep instructor Tommy Wallach:

This is a really great essay from GRE superstar Jen Dziura. Notice how her introduction manages to be playful and professional at once ("Chemical Y is a truly unknown actor in this drama."). Don't be afraid to make your essays entertaining; those poor readers have to score dozens and dozens of these things every day, and they'll be grateful for a little bit of fun.

Jen focuses her big second paragraph on the primary assumption made in the passage, that Chemical Y is going to improve the whole by-product disposal issue. If I were writing this essay, I might break this paragraph into two smaller ones, just to give the reader a bit of a break. I might have the first paragraph focus on the issue of Chemical Y's own by-products and disposal costs, and the second paragraph on the issue of whether manufacturing/purchasing Chemical Y might cost more. Jen hits both of these points already, so the change would merely be an organizational one. (My OCD brain always strives for exactly five paragraphs, even though there's no rule about it!)

Notice also how many ideas Jen had before she started writing. There were so many, some of them had to get left by the wayside! If you know you have plenty of good ideas, don't hurt yourself trying to stretch the essay to fit them all in. Organization is key, so keeping your paragraphs focused is better, even

if you leave out an idea or two (I might have grabbed on to the “minimal cost of switching” myself, but there’s so much here, there’s really no need). In this essay, it’s easy to see that paragraph two is about the profit side of things, where paragraph three is about the revenue side of things. Jen knows that essay readers need to be able to see exactly what each paragraph is about, preferably within the first couple sentences of that paragraph.