All About the GRE Essays

Here you'll learn all the basics about GRE Analytical Writing—what the essay questions look like, testing procedures, how the essays are scored, and so forth. Just click on the links or scroll down.

The Two GRE Analytical Writing Tasks

GRE Analytical Writing consists of two distinct sections, or writing "tasks":

- Present Your Perspective on an Issue (45 Minutes)
- Analyze an Argument (30 Minutes)

During each of these two sections, you'll compose an essay in which you respond to the specific question presented. You'll record your response using the word processor built into the GRE. (You may elect to submit handwritten responses instead. GRE readers are not predisposed to award different scores, either higher or lower, for handwritten essays.)

The IssuePerspective Section. This 45minute section tests your ability to present a position on an issue effectively and persuasively. Your task is to compose an essay in which you respond to a brief (12 sentence) opinion about an issue. You should consider various perspectives, take a position on the issue and argue for that position. The testing system will present two issue topics to you, and you will choose either one for your response.

(To see what an Issue question looks like, take a peek at a simulated IssuePerspective question and sample response.)

The ArgumentAnalysis Section. This 30minute section is designed to test your critical reasoning and analytic (as well as writing) skills. Your task is to compose an essay in which you critique the stated argument and indicate how it could be improved, but not to present your own views on the Argument's topic. The testing system will present to you one Argument only, to which you

must respond. (Contrary to the IssuePerspective section, you will NOT be able to choose among Arguments.)

(To see what an Argument question looks like, take a peek at a simulated ArgumentAnalysis question and sample response.)

The Official Pool of Essay Questions

The testing system's database currently contains about 245 distinct IssuePerspective topics and about 245 distinct Arguments. The specific ones appearing on your test will be drawn randomly from these two official lists.

The testing service provides the complete lists of Issues and Arguments at its official website. (Link to the lists via my site's entry page.) My book includes model responses to 125 Issues and 125 Arguments (see Book Information).

NOTE: The lists are not published in the official GRE Bulletin (free from ETS), and I am not permitted to reproduce any of the official Issues or Arguments either in my book or at this website.

Procedural Rules You Should Know

Here are the key procedural rules for GRE Analytical Writing:

- Before the timed test begins the testing system will lead you through a computer tutorial, during which you'll read the complete directions for each section, and learn how to use the builtin word processor and other computerized testing functions (e.g., how to scroll, use the mouse, etc.). You can also practice using the word processor before commencing the timed test.
- The testing system does not allow you to return to either of the two essays once you've moved on.
- If you've completed either essay before the time limit has elapsed, you can proceed immediately to the next section by clicking the EXIT SECTION button at the bottom of the screen.
- You might encounter the two essay sections in either order.
- No break is provided between the two sections.
- Pencils and scratch paper are provided. (The exam supervisor will collect these materials at the conclusion of your exam.)

Using the GRE Word Processor

Unless you elect to provide handwritten responses, you'll record your essay responses electronically, with the word processor built into the GRE. During the computer tutorial that precedes that actual timed test, you'll practice using the GRE word processor. Here are its key features.

Navigation and editing—available keyboard commands. Here are the navigational and editing keys available in the GRE word processor:

Backspace removes the character to the left of the cursor Delete removes the character to the right of the cursor Home moves the cursor to the beginning of the line End moves the cursor to the end of the line Arrow Keys move the cursor up, down, left, or right Enter inserts a paragraph break (starts a new line) Page Up moves the cursor up one page (screen) Page Down moves the cursor down one page (screen)

Common keyboard commands NOT available. Certain oftenused features of standard word processing programs are not available in the GRE word processor. For example, no keyboard commands are available for:

TAB—disabled (does not function)
Beginning/end of paragraph (not available)
Beginning/end of document (not available)

Mousedriven editing functions. In addition to editing keys, the GRE word processor includes mousedriven CUT, PASTE, and UNDO. Draganddrop cutandpaste is not available.

Selecting text you wish to cut or copy. You select text the same way as with standard word processing programs: either (1) hold down your mouse button while sweeping the Ibeam on the screen over the desired text, or (2) hold down the SHIFT key and use the navigation keys to select text.

The CUT button. If you wish to delete text but want to save it to a temporary clipboard for pasting elsewhere, select that text (see above) then click on the CUT button. Cutting text is not the same as deleting it. When you delete text (using the DELETE key), you cannot paste it elsewhere in your document (but see UNDO below).

The PASTE button. If you wish to move text from one position to another, select and cut the text, then reposition your cursor where you want the text to go, and click on the PASTE button.

The UNDO button. Click on this button to undo the most recent delete, cut, or paste that you performed.

CAUTION: The GRE word processor stores only your most recent delete, cut, or paste. Also, Multiple Undo is not available.

The vertical scroll bar. Once you key in 10 lines or so, you'll have to scroll to view your entire response. If you don't know how to scroll, the computer tutorial preceding the test will show you how.

Spell checking, fonts, attributes, hyphenation. The GRE word processor does not include a spell checker, nor does it allow you to choose typeface or point size.

Neither manual nor automatic hyphenation is available. Attributes such as bold, italics, and underlining are not available.

> Note: As for words that you would otherwise italicize or underline (such as titles or foreign words), it's okay to leave them as is. The readers understand the limitations of the GRE word processor.

The GRE Essay "Readers" (Graders)

Within two weeks after the test, your two GRE essays will be read and graded. Two readers will read and score your Issue essay, and two different readers will read and score your Argument essay. For either essay, if the two readers' scores differ by more than one point, an additional, very experienced reader will read that essay and adjudicate the discrepancy. All GRE essay readers are college or university faculty members, drawn primarily from the academic areas of English and Communications.

The Scoring System for the GRE Essays

Each reader evaluates your writing independently of any other reader, and no reader is informed of the other readers' scores. Each reader will employ a "holistic" grading method in which he or she will assign a single score from 0 to 6 (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6) based on the overall quality of your writing. All readers employ the same specific ETS scoring criteria.

Your Analytical Writing score is the average of all four readers' scores. However, in the case of an adjudicating score, that score is given 50% weight in calculating your final score. Final scores are rounded to halfpoint intervals, and average scores falling midway between halfpoint intervals are rounded up.

Here's an example of how the scoring system works. Notice that an adjudicating reader read and graded the Issue essay, and that the weighted average of the readers' grades is 3¾, which has been rounded up to 4, since 3¾ is not a halfpoint interval.

Example

3 Reader A's evaluation of the Issue essay 5 Reader B's evaluation of the Issue essay 4 Adjudicating reader's evaluation of the Issue essay 3 Reader C's evaluation of the Argument essay 4 Reader D's evaluation of the Argument essay 4 Final GRE Analytical Writing score

In addition to your score of 0–6, you'll receive a percentile rank (0% to 99%) for your performance. A percentile rank of 60%, for example, indicates that you scored higher than 60% of all other testtakers and lower than 40% of all other testtakers.

Percentile ranks are based on the performance of all GRE testtakers, not just those responding to the same two essay questions.

Criteria for Scoring the GRE Essays

In evaluating the overall quality of your writing, the readers will consider four general areas of ability:

- Content: your ability to present cogent, persuasive, and relevant ideas and arguments through sound reasoning and supporting examples
- Organization: your ability to present your ideas in an organized and cohesive fashion
- Language: your control of the English language, including your vocabulary and diction (word choice)
- Mechanics: your facility with the conventions of Standard Written English (grammar, syntax, and effective expression), but not spelling or punctuation

Which of these areas is most important? Official statements by ETS suggest that the first two areas are more important than the last two. However, my discussions with ETS readers suggest that writing style, grammar, and diction—i.e., your ability to communicate ideas effectively in writing—may influence the reader just as much as the ideas themselves. So the bottom line is that you should strive to demonstrate competency in all four areas. Of course, if you're weak in one area, you can still achieve a high overall score by demonstrating strength in other areas.

Specific Scoring Criteria. GRE readers follow the scoring criteria that are printed in the official GRE Bulletin. Here are the essential requirements for topscoring ("6") essays (notice that you can attain a top score of 6 even if your essays contain minor errors in grammar, word usage, spelling, or punctuation):

Present Your Perspective on an Issue Requirements for a Score of 6 (Outstanding)

- o The essay develops a position on the issue through the use of incisive reasons and persuasive examples.
- o The essay's ideas are conveyed clearly and articulately.
- o The essay maintains proper focus on the issue and is well organized.
- o The essay demonstrates proficiency, fluency, and maturity in its use of sentence structure, vocabulary, and idiom.
- o The essay demonstrates an excellent command of the elements of Standard Written English, including grammar, word usage, spelling, and punctuation—but may contain minor flaws in these areas.

Analyze an Argument Requirements for a Score of 6 (Outstanding)

- o The essay identifies the key features of the argument and analyzes each one in a thoughtful manner.

- The essay supports each point of critique with insightful reasons and examples.
- The essay develops its ideas in a clear, organized manner, with appropriate transitions to help connect ideas together.
- The essay demonstrates proficiency, fluency, and maturity in its use of sentence structure, vocabulary, and idiom.
- The essay demonstrates an excellent command of the elements of Standard Written English, including grammar, word usage, spelling, and punctuation—but may contain minor flaws in these areas.

The criteria for lower scores are based on the same factors as those suggested above; the only difference is that the standard for quality decreases for successively lower scores.

Reporting of Scores to TestTakers and to the Schools

1015 days after your test, ETS will mail to you an official score report for your GRE. The report will include your Analytical Writing score as well as your percentile ranking for Analytical Writing. At the same time, ETS will mail a score report to each school you've designated to receive your score report. (ETS does not report percentile rankings to the schools.) Beginning in July, 2003, score reports will also include your essay responses.

NOTE: GRE test takers who submit handwritten essays should not expect score report until six weeks after the test.

How the Schools Use GRE Analytical Writing Scores

Each graduate department will determine for itself how much weight to place on Analytical Writing scores relative to scores for the multiplechoice sections, as well as to other admission criteria (GRE subjecttest scores, GPA, personal statements, recommendation letters, work and other experience, etc.). An admissions committee might use Analytical Writing scores as a preliminary screen for all applicants; more likely , however, a committee will use Analytical Writing scores to decide among similarly qualified candidates. Contact the individual academic departments for their particular policies.

The Issue-Perspective Writing Task

The IssuePerspective section is designed to test your ability to communicate your opinion on an issue effectively and persuasively. Your task is to analyze the issue presented, considering various perspectives, and to develop your own position on the issue. There is no "correct" answer.

Your IssuePerspective question will consist of two elements:

the directive: a brief instruction for responding to the statement (the directive is always the same)

the topic: a oneor twosentence statement of opinion about a particular issue of general intellectual interest

Here's a simulated IssuePerspective question. This question is similar to the ones on the actual GRE. Keep in mind, however, that it is not one of the official questions, so you won't see this one on the actual exam. (I'm not permitted to reproduce the actual test questions at this Website.)

Simulated Issue-Perspective Question

Present your perspective on the issue below, using relevant reasons and/or examples to support your views.

"Look at any person today who has achieved great success in his or her career or profession, and you'll see either someone without a significant personal life or someone with significant personal failings."

Now here's a sample response to this question. As you read the response, keep in mind:

- None of the points asserted in this response are irrefutable, because the issue is far from "blackandwhite." It's all a matter of opinion.
- This response is relatively simple in style and language and brief enough (463 words) to compose and type in 45 minutes.
- This response meets all the ETS criteria for a score of 6 (the highest possible score).

Sample Response (463 Words)

I agree with the statement insofar as great professional success often comes at the expense of one's personal life, and can even be inextricably related to one's personal failings. However, the statement is problematic in that it unfairly suggests that personal and professional success are mutually exclusive in

every case.

Undeniably, today's professionals must work long hours to keep their heads above water, let alone to get ahead in life financially. This is especially true in Japan, where cost of living, coupled with corporate culture, compel professional males to all but abandon their families and literally to work themselves to death. While the situation here in the states may not be as critical, the two-income family is now the norm, not by choice but by necessity.

However, our society's professionals are taking steps to remedy the problem. First, they are inventing ways--such as job sharing and telecommuting--to ensure that personal life is not sacrificed for career. Second, they are setting priorities and living those hours outside the workplace to their fullest. In fact, professional success usually requires the same time-management skills that are useful to find time for family, hobbies, and recreation. Third, more professionals are changing careers to ones which allow for some degree of personal fulfillment and self-actualization. Besides, many professionals truly love their work and would do it without compensation, as a hobby. For them, professional and personal fulfillment are one and the same.

Admittedly, personal failings often accompany professional achievement. In fact, the two are often symbiotically related. The former test the would-be achiever's mettle; they pose challenges--necessary resistance that drives one to professional achievement despite personal shortcomings. In the arts, a personal failing may be a necessary ingredient or integral part of the process of achieving. Artists and musicians often produce their most creative works during periods of depression, addiction, or other distress. In business, insensitivity to people can breed grand achievements, as with the questionable labor practices of the great philanthropist Andrew Carnegie.

However, for every individual whose professional success is bound up in his or her personal failings, there is another individual who has achieved success in both realms. One need only look at the recent American presidents--Carter, Reagan, and Bush--to see that it is possible to lead a balanced life which includes time for family, hobbies, and recreation, while immersed in a busy and successful career.

In sum, I agree that as a general rule people find it difficult to achieve great success both personally and professionally, and in fact history informs us that personal failings are often part-and-parcel of great achievements. However, despite the

growing demands of career on today's professionals, a fulfilling personal life remains possible--by working smarter, by setting priorities, and by making suitable career choices.

The ArgumentAnalysis Writing Task

The ArgumentAnalysis writing task is designed to test your criticalreasoning skills as well as your writing skills. Your task is to critique the stated argument in terms of its cogency (logical soundness) and in terms of the strength of the evidence offered in support of the argument.

Your ArgumentAnalysis question will consist of two elements:

the directive: a brief instruction for responding to the argument (the directive is always the same)

the argument: a paragraphlength passage, which presents an argument (introduced as a quotation from some fictitious source)

Here's a simulated ArgumentAnalysis question. This question is similar to the ones on the actual GRE. Keep in mind, however, that it is not one of the official questions, so you won't see this one on the actual exam. (I'm not permitted to reproduce the actual test questions at this Website.)

Simulated Argument-Analysis Question

Discuss how well reasoned you find the argument below.

The following appeared in a memo from the manager of UpperCuts hair salon:

"According to a nationwide demographic study, more and more people today are moving from suburbs to downtown areas. In order to boost sagging profits at UpperCuts, we should take advantage of this trend by relocating the salon from its current location in Apton's suburban mall to downtown Apton, while retaining the salon's decidedly upscale ambiance. Besides, Hair-Dooz, our chief competitor at the mall, has just relocated downtown and is thriving at its new location, and the most prosperous hair

salon in nearby Brainard is located in that city's downtown area. By emulating the locations of these two successful salons, UpperCuts is certain to attract more customers."

Now here's a sample response to this question. As you read the response, keep in mind:

- Each one of the "body" paragraphs isolates and discusses a distinct flaw in the argument. A typical GRE argument will contain 34 flaws. (This simulated Argument contains 4 major flaws).
- This response is relatively simple in style and language and brief enough (410 words) to compose and type in 30 minutes.
- This response meets all the ETS criteria for a score of 6 (the highest possible score).

Sample Response (410 Words)

The manager of UpperCuts (UC) argues here that UC would improve its profitability by relocating from a suburban mall to downtown Apton. To support this argument, the manager relies in part on a certain study about demographic trends, and in part on the fact that two other similar businesses are located in downtown areas. However, the manager's reasoning rests on a series of unproven assumptions, which together undermine the argument.

One such assumption is that Apton reflects the cited demographic trend. The mere fact that one hair salon has moved downtown hardly suffices to show that the national trend applies to Apton specifically. For all we know, in Apton there is no such trend, or perhaps the trend is in the opposite direction. Thus I would need to know whether more people are in fact moving to downtown Apton before I could either accept or reject the manager's proposal.

Even assuming that downtown Apton is attracting more residents, relocating downtown might not result in more customers for UC, especially if downtown residents are not interested in UC's upscale style and prices. Besides, Hair-Dooz might draw potential customers away from UC, just as it might have at the mall. Before I can accept that UC would attract more customers downtown, the manager would need to supply clear proof of a sufficient demand downtown for UC's service.

Even if there would be a high demand for UC's service in downtown Apton, an increase in the number of patrons would not necessarily improve UC's profitability. UC's expenses might be higher downtown, in which case it might be no more, or perhaps

even less, profitable downtown than at the mall. Therefore, before I could agree with the proposal, I would need to examine a comparative cost-benefit analysis for the two locations.

As for the Brainard salon, its success might be due to particular factors that don’t apply to UC. For example, perhaps the Brainard salon thrives only because it is long-established in downtown Brainard. Accordingly, in order to determine whether the success of the Brainard salon portends success for UC in downtown Apton, I would need to know why the former salon is successful in the first place.

In sum, the argument relies on what might amount to two poor analogies --between UC and two other salons --as well as a sweeping generalization about demographic trends, which may or may not apply to Apton. As a result, without the additional information indicated above, I find the argument unconvincing at best.

Preparing for the GRE Essays

Writing essays under timed conditions can be a trying experience and can raise your anxiety to a point where you find it difficult to perform well. Adding to this anxiety is the overwhelming number of possible topics. The fact that ETS has predisclosed all of the topics actually increases test anxiety, since you might feel that you're at a competitive disadvantage unless you're ready for each and every one of the questions. Here are my recommendations for minimizing this anxiety and for making the best use of the time you have to get ready for GRE Analytical Writing.

Don’t try to memorize my sample essays.

If you actually were to memorize each and every sample essay in Parts 2 and 3 of my book and reproduce any two of them on the actual exam, you would well deserve the highest possible score, just for the effort! Of course, that’s my opinion. Unfortunately, that’s not the way the folks at ETS view things. Be forewarned: GRE readers will have access to my book and are likely to recognize plagiarism when they see it. There’s nothing wrong with borrowing ideas, reasons, and transitional phrases from my sample essays. Do try, however, to include your own specific examples, especially in your Issue essay; and be sure that in both essays you express your ideas in your own words.

Practice, practice, and practice!

You could read my book cover to cover ten times and still perform poorly on the actual exam. There's no substitute for putting yourself to the task under simulated exam conditions, especially under the pressure of time. Compose as many practice essays as you reasonably have time for, responding to the official questions. As you do so, keep in mind:

- Always practice under timed conditions. I cannot overemphasize this point. Unless you are put under the pressure of time, you really won't be ready for the test.
- Unless you plan to provide handwritten essays during your exam, always use a word processor for your practice tests. Restrict your use of editing functions to the ones provided on the real exam.
- Evaluate your practice essays. Practicing isn't all that helpful if you make the same blunders again and again. After composing an essay, use the official scoring criteria to evaluate it. (Better yet, ask an English professor to evaluate it for you.) Then reflect on your weaknesses, and concentrate on improving in those areas the next time. Don't worry if your essays don't turn out as polished as the samples in my book. Concentrate instead on improving your own performance.

Take notes on a variety of Issue topics and Arguments from the official pool.

Download the complete pool of offical Issue topics and Arguments. Select ten to fifteen Issue topics covering diverse themes, and any ten to fifteen Arguments. For each one, spend about 5 minutes brainstorming and making notes. This exercise will go a long way toward ensuring that you don't find yourself paralyzed, or "stuck," during the actual exam.

Take notes on selected essays from Parts 2 and 3 of my book.

For the Issue writing task, identify thematic areas (from the list in Part 1 of my book) with which you're especially unfamiliar, then get up to speed for these areas by reading the relevant essays in Part 2 of my book. As you read these selected essays:

- Pick up thesis ideas from the first and last paragraphs of each essay.
- Make note of reasons you find clearest, most convincing, or most useful.
- Highlight transition and rhetorical phrases. (Then, as you compose practice essays, make a special effort to incorporate your favorite phrases so that they become part of your natural writing style.)

- Identify each type of reasoning problem that the essay discusses and that you learned about in Part 1 of my book.
- Highlight transition phrases, which connect the essay's points of critique. (Make a special effort to incorporate similar phrases into your practice essays.)

For the Argument writing task, randomly select as many essays from Part 3 of my book as you reasonably have time to consider. For each essay:

Consult my other GRE Analytical Writing book.

If your analyticalwriting skills need significant improvement, further help is available in my complementary book: Writing Skills for the GRE/GMAT Tests (also published by Peterson's). The book places special emphasis on building rhetorical writing skills, organizing your two GRE essays, and avoiding or correcting common language, grammar, and other mechanical problems. The book also explores additional (less frequent) reasoning problems with Arguments in the official pool. Finally, to help improve and polish your analytical and writing skills, the book contains a variety of reinforcement exercises for each writing task.

Dig even further for Issue ideas and examples—if you have ample time before your exam.

During your exam the testing system will present to you two Issue topics, and you can choose for your response whichever topic you are more familiar or comfortable with. But what if the testing system deals you two unfamiliar cards? Well, keep in mind that, according to the testing service, no special knowledge about any Issue topic is needed to score high on the Issue essay. Also keep in mind that the specific reasons and supporting examples you cite in your Issue essay are only one of several scoring criteria, and by no means the most important.

But if you have ample time to prepare for the exam, by all means go the extra mile (or kilometer). Referring to the list of common Issue themes in Part 1 of my book, roll up your sleeves, and hit the proverbial stacks for Issue ideas. All forms of media are fair game:

Magazines. The periodicals listed below feature articles that cover common Issue themes:

- o U.S. News and World Report: notable current events
- o The Economist: political and economic ideology
- o Reason: ideology and culture (loads of crossdiscipline articles)
- o The New Yorker: arts, humanities, sociology, popular culture
- o The Futurist: cultural and technological trends

With this list in hand, head to your local library or the magazine’s Website and rifle through some back issues or archived articles. You’ll come away brimming over with ideas for Issue essays.

Books. Check out books that survey key people, events, and developments in various areas of human endeavor. Here are two useful ones to start with (links open a separate browser window and take you to book information pages at Amazon.com):

- A History of Knowledge: Past, Present, and Future, by Charles van Doren (Birch Lane Press, 1991)
- The World's Greatest Ideas: An Encyclopedia of Social Inventions, ed. by Nicholas Alberly, et al (New Society Publications, 2001)

Your notes from college course work. Try dusting off your notes from college survey courses in art, science, history, politics, and sociology. You might surprise yourself with what you'll find that you can recycle into a GRE Issue essay.

The Web. Take advantage of the World Wide Web to brush up on common Issue themes. Follow my links to useful online resources for Issue topics.

NOTE: This link takes you to a page at the Internet Edition of my book Writing Skills for the GRE and GMAT Tests. (Clicking the link opens a new browser window.)

Television and video. If you're a couch potato, tune in to the History channel or to your local PBS station for Issueessay ideas. Also consider purchasing (or renting from a library) "History of the Millennium," a 3hour A&E (Arts & Entertainment) channel production, which surveys the 100 most influential people of the most recent millennium (10001999). Zero in on a few of the featured artists, scientists, political leaders, and philosophers, and you'll be ready with good Issue examples.