

Chapter 1

Know Your Enemy: What the GRE Looks Like

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Unlike traditional, standardized paper-and-pencil tests, which feature a roomful of test-takers sweating and fretting together in a lecture hall, the GRE is now totally computer based in the United States. Paper-and-pencil tests are only available in countries with limited access to computers. No, you don't get to take the test on your home computer with a dictionary in one hand and a tropical drink with a paper umbrella in the other (sorry if we got your hopes up only to dash them cruelly).

The GRE is offered at designated technology centers throughout the world on most days of the year, usually during standard business hours. This schedule means that if you're not a morning person, you don't have to worry about getting up at the crack of dawn and trudging across town to attempt to make your lethargic brain cells function at 8 a.m. You can take the test at any hour you personally consider civilized, such as later in the afternoon, or even in the evening. For info on signing up for the GRE, see the current *GRE Information and Registration Bulletin*. (You can pick up this bulletin at a college admissions office, register online for it at www.ets.org, or register via phone by calling 800-473-2255.) To see the GRE test centers nearest you, visit www.ets.org and plug in your state.

For each section of the GRE, the difficulty level of the questions is tailored to your abilities. You thus have a *bespoke* (custom-tailored) exam. Each section begins with a question of average difficulty (500 level). If you answer this question correctly, the computer elevates you to the 580-ish level and gives you a question that's more difficult than the first.

If you answer this second question correctly, the computer places you at about 640, and you receive a question commensurate with that ability level. As long as you keep answering questions correctly, your score goes up, and you get more difficult questions. Later questions don't cause as dramatic a jump in your score as the first few questions. And when you miss a question, your score goes down, and you get an easier question.

Eventually, you reach a level at which you're answering about half the questions correctly. At that point, the computer only adjusts your score by about ten points at a time. (Test-takers scoring at or near 800 may never get to the point at which they're missing half the questions; in contrast, those poor souls scoring at or near 200 may never achieve a level at which half of their answers are correct.)

Looking at the Breakdown (To Avoid Having One!)

The GRE consists of three scored sections: one 30-minute Verbal subtest, one 45-minute Math (Quantitative) subtest, one 45-minute Analytical Writing essay, and one 30-minute Analytical Writing essay. Typically, you get 30 verbal questions, 28 math questions, and 2 essay topics. In the Verbal and Math sections, the number of each question type (such as Analogies and Quantitative Comparisons) is proportional to what appeared on the old paper-and-pencil version of the test.

Table 1-1 provides a quick overview of what the GRE is all about, how many questions it torments and delights you with, and how much time you have to complete each section. The various sections may be arranged in any order. (For the scoop on the unscored section of the test, flip to “Understanding When Your Answers Don’t Count: The Possible Unscored Section” later in this chapter.) Note that the sections marked with asterisks in Table 1-1 aren’t always given, but you should be prepared for the worst just in case.

Table 1-1 GRE Breakdown by Section		
Section	Number of Questions	Time Allotted
Verbal	30	30 minutes
Math	28	45 minutes
Analytical Writing	2	75 minutes
*Unidentified unscored	28 to 35	30 to 60 minutes
*Identified unscored	Test-maker’s surprise	



On the GRE, the first five questions of the Verbal section and the first five questions of the Math section are the most important. You get a much higher score if you answer the first five questions correctly and miss all the rest than if you miss the first five questions and answer all the others correctly.

Be sure to use your time wisely. Because you can’t go back and change your answers, you must be as accurate as possible on each section’s first five questions to ensure you’ll receive harder questions (that are worth more points!) for the rest of the exam. That sounds bizarre, we know. But you really do want harder questions because the level of difficulty you reach determines your score. If you slip up and miss one early question, you can still reel off a series of correct answers, show that your mistake was a fluke, and get to the harder questions. However, if you miss a handful of early questions, the computer determines that these questions are too difficult for you and gives you easy questions. You may answer all these easy questions correctly, but your test will be over by the time the computer raises the difficulty level to the high-score range.

So exactly what types of questions and how many of each type can you expect to run into on the GRE? Check out Table 1-2 for the answers.

Table 1-2 **GRE Breakdown by Question Style**
(Not Including the Possible Unscored Section)

<i>Type of Question</i>	<i>Number of Questions</i>
Antonyms	8–10
Analogies	6–8
Sentence Completions	5–7
Reading Comprehension	6–10
Quantitative Comparisons	14
Problem Solving/Data Interpretation	4
Discreet Quantitative (multiple choice)	10
Perspective on an Issue	1 topic
Analysis of an Argument	1 topic



These different question types are mixed throughout the section in which they belong. For example, you may encounter two Analogies, two Sentence Completions, and two Antonyms to start off your Verbal section. Next, you may see some Reading Comprehension questions, then more Analogies, and so on. The Math section could feature three Quantitative Comparisons, two Problem Solving questions, two Data Interpretation questions, four more Quantitative Comparisons, and so on.

Scoring 101

You don't own the Ferrari yet. (If you do, and you're a single, eligible male, please write to us care of the publisher.) You don't bring in the six-digit paycheck yet. (If you do, please see the previous parenthetical comment.) Being 21 (or 25 or 30) is rough, huh? After all, you need something to boast about. How about your GRE scores? GRE scores are to would-be graduate students what salaries are to people in the Real World. Students brag about them, exaggerate them, and try to impress others with them.



When you finish the test, you have the option of either seeing your Verbal and Math scores or canceling them. If you cancel your scores, you won't get a chance to see how you did. On the other hand, you can't decide to cancel your scores after you see them, so think carefully about how well you feel you've done. Finding out your scores at the end of the testing session is part of what people like about the computerized testing process. Instead of waiting two to four weeks to receive your scores in the mail, you can get the good news immediately! Schools still have to wait a little while though, generally about 15 days.

Figuring out your scores

With the GRE, you receive three separate scores: Verbal, Math, and Analytical Writing. Although you can obtain your unofficial Verbal and Math scores immediately after taking the test (as explained in the preceding section), you must wait 10 to 15 days to get your Analytical Writing score in the mail. Here's the scoring range for each of the three sections:

- ✓ **Verbal:** The Verbal score (also called verbal ability) ranges from 200 to 800 in 10-point increments. Yes, you read that right. You automatically get 200 points for showing up at the testing facility and staring at the computer.
- ✓ **Math:** The Math score also ranges from 200 to 800 in 10-point increments.
- ✓ **Analytical Writing:** The Analytical Writing score ranges from 0 to 6. Two graders each assign you up to 6 points; then anonymous GRE employees average those two scores together. If the two graders don't agree, another grader steps in to settle the discrepancy.

Knowing how your scores measure up

On a recent GRE, the median scores on the Verbal and Math sections (that is, half the people taking the exam were above these scores, half were below these scores) were 480 and 570, respectively. Averages for the Analytical Writing section change according to which GRE you take.



The average of students taking the exam in April may be slightly different from the average of students taking the exam in June. Your individual goals should depend on which grad schools you're applying to and what GPA (grade-point average) you have. There's no such thing as a passing or failing score — only what you need to get accepted to the program that you have your heart set on.

Playing the guessing game

You may have no choice but to guess because the computer won't budge until you choose an answer. Unlike paper-and-pencil tests, on which you can move around and choose questions that are more to your liking, the computer requires you to mark an answer before you go on to the next question.

So if you're completely stuck, don't waste time agonizing. Guess quickly and move on. Which oval should you fill in? Any. Don't listen to the obscenely abusive rumors that the correct answers on the exam more often correspond to the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth ovals. Instead, remember that on the computer screen, the ovals aren't marked A, B, C, D, and E; they're left blank. Every answer has the same probability. Which oval you choose has no bearing.



Be sure to answer all the questions. You're penalized more for unanswered questions than for wrong answers, so make sure that you get to the end, even if that means guessing wildly in the last minute or so.

Discovering the number of correct answers you need for specific scores

Following are rough estimates of how many questions you must answer correctly to achieve certain scores on each section. These numbers change from exam to exam. Also, keep in mind that your individual scores are based upon the difficulty level of the questions, your performance on the questions, and the number of questions that you answer.

Verbal scores

To get a 400, you need to correctly answer 14 out of 30 questions (about 47 percent).

To get a 500, you need to correctly answer 18 out of 30 questions (about 60 percent).

To get a 600, you need to correctly answer 22 out of 30 questions (about 73 percent).

To get a 700, you need to correctly answer 25 out of 30 questions (about 84 percent).

Math scores

To get a 400, you need to correctly answer 11 out of 28 questions (about 39 percent).

To get a 500, you need to correctly answer 15 out of 28 questions (about 54 percent).

To get a 600, you need to correctly answer 19 out of 28 questions (about 68 percent).

To get a 700, you need to correctly answer 23 out of 28 questions (about 82 percent).

Analytical Writing scores

There's no particular "number correct" in this section because you have two essays to write. See Chapter 20 for more info on how the essays are scored.

Understanding When Your Answers Don't Count: The Possible Unscored Section

The GRE test you take may in fact feature an additional Verbal or Math section, and you won't necessarily know which section is the unscored one. So what's the story behind this "unscored" section anyway? (Some people — okay, okay, the GRE powers-that-be — refer to it as an *experimental* or *equating* section.) Why does the GRE often feature a section that doesn't count?

One of the two possible unscored sections isn't identified as such because the test-makers want to use you as a guinea pig, trying out new questions and double-checking that all questions are fair. You're an unwilling — and unwitting — participant. You're obviously unwilling (who'd actually want to prolong this agony?). You're unwitting, because you don't know which section is unscored. The test-makers wouldn't exactly find out much about their new questions if you could sit back and refuse to do your best, knowing that your unwillingness wouldn't hurt your score, now would they?



The unscored section can be Verbal or Math. Either way, you'll have no idea which one isn't counted. Well, you may have *some* idea: If your test has two Verbal sections, you can deduce that one of them is unscored — but which one? Don't try to outsmart the test-makers. The GRE powers-that-be employ rooms full of men and women whose only task in life is to create these mind-warping questions. You, as a normal person, don't stand a chance of outsmarting them, so why even try? Just do your best on every section.

If you want to give your brain a break, you may be able to do so on an identified unscored section. The GRE sometimes tells you about an unscored section, which you don't need to take, at the end of the test. If you feel like playing with the computer and helping out the Educational Testing Service (the organization that creates and administers the GRE), you can go ahead and answer the questions, but you aren't obligated to do so.

I wish it were all Greek to me: A welcome to international students

Students from all over the world take the GRE in order to attend American graduate schools. There are GRE test-prep courses for students from Brazil, Taiwan, the Ivory Coast, Egypt, Japan — all over the globe. Many courses are enriched by the contributions of students from Korea, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, China, and Mexico. To all of you readers from other nations, welcome!

As international students, you have strengths and weaknesses that are different from those of American students; therefore, the focus of your study should be different as well. Here are our suggestions to help you get the most out of this book and do your best on the actual GRE:

✔ **Concentrate on the questions that test vocabulary — Antonyms and Analogies.** You probably have an advantage over American students on these questions, believe it or not — especially if your native tongue is a Romance language, such as Spanish or French. Romance languages are Latin-based and commonly use words that are uncommon in English. Take, for example, *bibliophile*. A Spanish speaker knows *biblio* means book (*biblioteca* means library) and can figure out this “hard” word pretty easily. (A bibliophile is a book-lover.)

One more thing: Because you’ve studied English, you’re used to memorizing vocabulary (unlike American students who haven’t taken vocabulary tests since junior high school). Although you probably can’t dramatically change your basic reading comprehension level in a few hours, you *can*

dramatically add to your vocabulary. You, more than American students, need to keep and learn the vocabulary lists suggested throughout this book.

✔ **Forget about the Reading Comprehension section.** The reading passages in the GRE are long, hard, and booooring. They’re difficult enough to understand for people who grew up speaking and reading English and are totally demoralizing for people who didn’t. Our suggestion is that you not take Reading Comprehension too seriously. Take your time on the first passage, reading it slowly and carefully. Then scroll through the passage thoroughly to answer the questions. Making quick guesses when you get to the other passages is a good idea.

✔ **Concentrate on the math, especially geometry.** Although you do get separate Verbal and Math scores, some colleges concentrate on your *overall*, or combined, score. Doing extremely well on math can compensate for weaker verbal skills. We suggest that you pay particular attention to the geometry problems. Rarely are they *word problems* — questions that require a lot of reading. Geometry problems usually feature figures that you can easily understand and use to answer the questions — regardless of whether you’re good at English.

✔ **Go, Go, Go!** We can’t say it enough: The GRE penalizes you more for unanswered questions than for wrong answers. Be sure to fill in an answer for every question, even if you have to guess wildly. You absolutely must finish the exam.

Add it all up, and you realize that the part of the test that determines your future takes two and a half hours. (That’s right. Two hours and 30 minutes of this test may be roughly as important as four years of college.)

Keep in mind, though, that you’ll probably be at the testing center for approximately four and a half hours. You get some breaks (highlighted in the next section), and you walk through some procedures (such as getting comfortable with the computer via a tutorial and receiving scratch paper). In other words, kiss an entire morning or afternoon goodbye.

Gimme a Break! The GRE Intermissions

You have the option of taking a ten-minute break between the second and third sections of the GRE. Depending on whether your bladder is the size of Rhode Island or Texas, you may

or may not spend most of your break in the bathroom. Do yourself a favor: Don't drink or eat too much during the break. Nothing's worse than sitting there crossing and uncrossing your legs during the test as your eyeballs slowly turn yellow.

Between other sections of the test, you get a one-minute break — just enough time to stand up and stretch a bit. You don't have time to leave your seat and come back before the test resumes. If you absolutely, positively have to go to the restroom and leave the computer during the test, the clock keeps ticking.



You may want to grab some munchies to eat and water to drink at the big break, but make sure that the snacks are light and nutritious. Sugar makes you high for a few minutes and then brings you way down. You don't need to crash right in the middle of a quadratic equation. Take a handful of peanuts, some trail mix, or anything else light that isn't going to send all the blood from your brain down to your stomach for digestion. Life's hard enough without trying to calculate the interior angles of a nonagon by using your stomach rather than your brain.

