

- » Knowing the layout of the GRE
- » Understanding how your scores are calculated
- » Bringing the GRE into your comfort zone

Chapter 1

Knowing the GRE

The GRE isn't an IQ test, nor is it a measure of your worth as a human being or a predictor of your ultimate success in life. The GRE is designed to assess your ability to excel in grad school by sizing you up in three areas.

- » **Work ethic:** How hard you're willing and able to work to achieve an elusive academic goal — in this case, performing well on the GRE. This reflects your work ethic, and graduate schools consider this to be a measure of how hard you'll work in their programs.
- » **Study skills:** How well you can master some basic study skills and be able to process and retain new information.
- » **Test-taking ability:** How well you can perform on a test, under pressure, which is a separate ability from being able to answer the questions. Exams are *ubiquitous* (appearing everywhere) to grad school, so you need to prove that you can take one without folding under pressure.

This book can guide you in the first area, but it's mostly up to you. As a study guide, however, this book shows you how to achieve the second and third areas, enabling you to study more effectively and efficiently and improve your overall test-taking skills. By knowing the material and taking the practice tests, you establish a foundation for doing well on the GRE. And usually, if you know what to do and how to do it, you might find yourself working a little bit harder. In this way, this book helps you further in that first area.

In this chapter, I discuss the GRE's structure and scoring system so you can build your strategies around them. With this guidance, you're better equipped to avoid surprises that may throw you off your game.

Knowing the GRE Sections

Standardized tests tend to bring on the chills. Telling someone you have to take the SAT, ACT, or GRE usually gets the same response as saying that you need to have your wisdom teeth pulled. However, with this book, the GRE isn't such a chilling experience, and breaking it down to its component parts makes it more manageable and less threatening.

Table 1-1 provides a quick overview of what's on the exam, in this order.

TABLE 1-1 GRE Breakdown by Section

Section	Number of Questions	Time Allotted
Analyze an Issue	1 essay	30 minutes
Verbal Section	12 questions	18 minutes
Math Section	12 questions	21 minutes
Verbal Section	15 questions	23 minutes
Math Section	15 questions	26 minutes
Total	1 essay, 54 questions	1 hour, 58 minutes



REMEMBER

At two hours long, the GRE challenges your stamina as much as your ability to answer the questions. It's not that much time, but it's more intense than most people are used to. No matter how solid your math and verbal skills are, you have to maintain your focus for the whole stretch, which isn't easy on a challenging task such as this. Build your test-taking stamina by practicing in two-hour sessions and taking timed practice tests.

There is no unscored section, but some unscored questions are mixed into some sections. Of course, you have no way of knowing which question is unscored, so treat each one as if it counts.



TIP

The GRE allows you to skip questions and return to them later, within that section. When you reach the end of a section, the GRE displays a review screen that indicates any unanswered questions. If you have time remaining in the section, return to these questions and answer them as well as you can. This feature is nice because you can knock out the easy questions first before spending time on the hard ones. (See Chapter 2 for more on planning your time.)

So what types of questions are there and how many of them can you expect on the GRE? Here's Table 1-2 with the details.

TABLE 1-2 GRE Breakdown by Question Type

Type of Question	Approximate Number of Questions
<i>Of 27 Math questions:</i>	
Multiple-choice with exactly one correct answer	10
Multiple-choice with one or more correct answers	3
Fill-in-the-blank with the answer	2
Data Interpretation (based on graphs)	3
Quantitative Comparisons	9
<i>Of 27 Verbal questions:</i>	
Text Completion	7
Sentence Equivalence	7
Argument Analysis or Select-a-Sentence	3
Reading Comprehension	10

Note that the question types are mixed throughout their sections, so you may encounter them in any order. Sometimes the software groups similar questions at the beginning or the end. For example, if you're halfway through a Verbal section and haven't seen a Text Completion question, you will.

Seeing the Scores

With the GRE, you receive three separate scores: Verbal, Math, and Analytical Writing. You drive home knowing your unofficial Verbal and Math scores (as explained in the following section), but you get your Analytical Writing score about two weeks later.

On the GRE, you can score a maximum of 340 points on the multiple-choice and 6 points on the essay. Here's the scoring range for each section.

- » **Verbal:** The Verbal score ranges from 130 to 170 in 1-point increments. You get 130 points if you answer just one question, but that won't help you much: You need to score as well as or better than most of the other test-takers to improve your chances of being admitted to your target school. The chapters in Part 2 give you the lowdown on the Verbal sections.
- » **Math:** The Math score also ranges from 130 to 170 in 1-point increments. The chapters in Part 3 have more on the Math sections.
- » **Analytical Writing:** The Analytical Writing score ranges from 0 to 6, in half-point increments, with 6 being the highest. More on how the essay is scored in Part 4.



REMEMBER

If a multiple-choice question requires two or more answers, you have to get all the answers correct; there is no partial credit. However, you don't lose points for a wrong answer, so if you're not sure, take a guess and return to the question later. More on this strategy in Chapter 2.

Calculating your score

Within each section, each question counts exactly the same toward your score: The more questions you get right, the higher your score for that section. An easy question is worth the same as a hard question. Because you can move back and forth within each section, one strategy is to skip around and answer all the easy questions first, then go back and work the hard questions. If you like this idea, *try it out on a practice test* before exam day.

The GRE online makes the *second* Math or Verbal section either easier or harder based on your performance. For example, if you do extremely well on the first Math section, the GRE makes the second Math section harder. Even if you don't get as many right answers in the second Math section, your score will be good, and it'll definitely be higher than the score of someone who bombs the first Math section but gets them all right in the second one. GRE scoring accommodates for the difficulty level of the questions in the second section.



WARNING

The strategy of bombing the first Math and Verbal sections in order to answer more questions correctly on the respective second sections isn't a good idea, and you'll end up with a low score. The exam doesn't score you based solely on the number of correct answers: It scores you based on how smart it thinks you are. So if you do *great* on the first Math section, the exam thinks you're smart and *ups* the difficulty level for the second Math section. If you don't answer all those

questions correctly, that's okay: The questions are harder, and the exam has evaluated your skills. Conversely, if you *bomb* the first Math section, the exam thinks you're not good at math, so it *drops* the level for the second Math section. If you answer most of those questions correctly, it doesn't help your score much because those questions are easier.

When you complete a practice test from Part 5, you can easily estimate your Math and Verbal scores. For the Math score, give yourself 1.5 points for each math question you answered correctly, add 130 to that number, and then round it down. Because the GRE has 27 Math questions, this method gives you an approximate score from 130 to 170. You can find your Verbal score the exact same way, because the GRE also has 27 Verbal questions. Note that this method doesn't account for the changing difficulty of the second Math and Verbal sections, but it's still an excellent way for you to track your progress as you improve.

Checking your score

If you score close to 340, you did great! If you score closer to 260, not so much. But wait — your score is right in between! Did you pass? Did you fail? What does it mean? Well, you can't really tell much about your score out of context. What does your score mean? It all goes by a percentile ranking. To download the complete percentile table, visit www.ets.org, click GRE Tests, and search for "percentile ranking." As of this writing, here are some highlights:

- » A raw score of 165 is typically a 96th percentile ranking in the Verbal and an 84th percentile ranking in the Math.
- » A raw score of 160 is typically an 85th percentile ranking in the Verbal and a 70th percentile ranking in the Math.

Basically, with a range of only 40 points per section among 350,000 GRE-takers per year, give or take, each point counts for a lot. How well you do is based on how well the other test-takers did. You need to ask your target school's admissions office what score you need to get in to that school — or, even better, what score you need for a scholarship! I've had students who were already accepted to their schools but were retaking the exam for the scholarship. Once you're in your program (or you've landed your scholarship), your GRE score doesn't matter.

Also, your exam score is only one part of the total application package. If you have a good GPA, a strong résumé, and relevant work experience, you may not need as high of a GRE score. On the other hand, a stellar GRE score can compensate for other weak areas.

Seeing or canceling your scores

Immediately after finishing the GRE, you have the option of either seeing or canceling your Verbal and Math scores. Unfortunately, you don't get to see your scores first. If you *think* you had a bad day, you can cancel, and your scores are neither reported to the schools nor shown to you. However, the schools are notified that you canceled your test. If you choose to see your score, you see it — minus the essay score — right away, but you can't cancel it after that.



REMEMBER

How much do the schools care about canceled scores? Probably not much, especially if a strong GRE score (from when you retake the test 21 days later) follows the notice of cancellation. If you really want to know the impact of a canceled score, check with the admissions office of your target school. Each school weighs canceled scores differently. See the sidebar, "Time Capsule: Your old GRE scores," for more about what to do after canceling your GRE score.

TIME CAPSULE: YOUR OLD GRE SCORES

What if you took the GRE a long time ago when you thought you were going to grad school and then opted to take a job or start a family instead? Well, if it was within the past five years, you're in luck (assuming you scored well). GRE scores are reportable for up to five years. That means that if you're pleased with your old score, you can send it right along to the school of your choice and say *adios* to this book right here and now. However, if you took the test more than five years ago, you have to take it again, so hold on to this book.

Taking advantage of the ScoreSelect option

At the end of the test, you have the option of choosing which test scores to send to your target schools, assuming that you've taken the GRE more than once. You can send the most recent scores, scores from the past (within five years), or all your test scores. However, you can't pick and choose sections from different testing dates. For example, if today you did better in Verbal but last time you did better in Math, you can't select only those sections — you have to send the entire test. Select whether to send the scores of today's test, any previous test, or all your tests.



REMEMBER

Your GRE score is good for five years after your testing date, so if you use ScoreSelect, you're limited to exams within the past five years.

Bringing the GRE into Your Comfort Zone

No need to panic about taking the GRE. You want to be confident and relaxed, which means bringing the GRE into your comfort zone. Working through this book and taking the practice tests can bring you very close to that goal, but having the right mindset is also useful. The following sections help put the GRE in the proper perspective and serve to remind you of just how prepared you really are.

Getting familiar with what's on the exam

The GRE focuses on a specific range of core concepts and presents questions in a fairly predictable format. Surprises are unlikely, especially if you're prepared and know what to expect. After you've successfully completed this book, you'll have the knowledge and experience needed to get the score you need on the exam. You will gain even more familiarity with the test questions and format by taking the computerized GRE sample tests.



REMEMBER

A little self-affirmation goes a long way. In the days leading up to the test and on test day, remind yourself just how fully prepared you are. The GRE is designed to be challenging, and everyone who takes it is nervous, but you're better prepared than they are. At least you will be.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEST PREP

Stories abound about how someone's friend's cousin's roommate took the GRE cold (with no preparation) and aced it. This may happen on a rare occasion, but you hear only the success stories. Those test-takers who went in cold and bombed don't brag about the outcome. As an instructor, however, I hear those other stories all the time.

The GRE doesn't test your intelligence: It tests how well you've prepared for the test. I'd put my money on a prepared dunce over an unprepared genius every single time. Dramatically raising a test-taker's score, say from the 30th to the 90th percentile ranking, is something I do every day before breakfast, and it's what I do for you in this book. Being prepared means knowing what to expect and how to answer each question, which means that the first time you calculate a fraction of a circle had better not be on the actual GRE. Make your mistakes *here*, in practice where it doesn't count, *not* on the test, where it could cost you admission or a scholarship.

Understanding the other admissions requirements

Although your performance on the GRE is important for admission, it's not the only thing that admissions departments look at. Your work experience, GPA, extracurricular activities (including volunteer work), and other factors that define you are also important parts of your application. Of course, you should still do your very best on the exam, but this isn't a do-or-die situation. Worst case: Retake the exam. Some of my best success stories are from students who retook the exam after forgetting key points or making mistakes on their first go-round. This also means you should schedule your exam with time to retake it if needed, but more on this in Chapter 2.