

HEARN CONSULTING

- The GRE Playbook
- A structured guide to understanding the GRE, building a study plan, and tracking your progress — for graduate and professional school applicants.
- GRADUATE PLAYBOOK
- Bryan Hearn, Ed.D. · www.hearn.consulting

WHAT'S INSIDE

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- Understanding the GRE

What is the GRE?

The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is a standardized test used for admissions to graduate and professional schools worldwide. It measures your ability to articulate and analyze complex ideas, solve quantitative problems, understand written passages, and communicate effectively under timed conditions. The GRE is administered year-round at testing centers and online.

	<p>KEY FACT</p> <p>Most graduate programs require or accept the GRE, though some have made it optional. Research your target programs' policies before committing to test prep.</p>
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Test Structure & Timing

Section	Duration	Questions	Score Range
Analytical Writing	60 minutes	2 essays	0-6 (half-point increments)
Verbal Reasoning	60 minutes (2 sections)	40 total	130-170 (1-point increments)
Quantitative Reasoning	70 minutes (2 sections)	40 total	130-170 (1-point increments)
Total	190 minutes	82 items	—

Adaptive Format Explained

The GRE uses an adaptive format: your performance on the first Verbal section determines the difficulty of the second section. The same applies to Quantitative. You cannot review or change previous answers. Strategic implication: attempt challenging questions carefully, as one wrong answer significantly impacts future difficulty and scoring potential.

What Programs Care About

Humanities	Mid-range Verbal (150-160), strong writing samples
STEM Fields	Quantitative focus (160+), less emphasis on Verbal
Business Schools	Balanced scores (155+), GPA and work experience weighted equally
Education Programs	Below average of admitted class varies; less competitive than MBA
Public Policy	Verbal emphasis (155+), analytical thinking critical

Score Percentiles & Context

Score	Verbal Percentile	Quant Percentile	Competitiveness
170	99th	99th	Exceptional—top 1%
160	80th	89th	Very competitive
150	47th	47th	Moderate/average
140	12th	12th	Below average
130	<1st	<1st	Minimal competitiveness

Required Materials & Resources

- Official GRE materials from ETS (Educational Testing Service):
 - Five full-length practice tests from Official GRE Guide
 - GRE Prep Plus (online tool with official questions)
 - Official Quantitative Reasoning and Verbal Reasoning guides
 - ETS Math Review (free, comprehensive math reference)
 - Supplementary prep resources (Manhattan Prep, Kaplan, Barron's)
 - Practice question banks with adaptive difficulty levels

- Do You Even Need the GRE?

Four-Step Decision Framework

Step	Action	Consideration
1. Check Requirements	Visit target program websites	Is it required, optional, or waived?
2. Note Language	Read policy carefully	May mention GRE waiver for strong candidates
3. Assess Your Profile	Compare GPA to program average	Strong GPA may reduce GRE importance
4. Consider Investment	Plan prep timeline (8-12 weeks)	Is time/cost worth potential score gain?

When to Take the GRE (Even If Optional)

Reason 1: Competitive Program	Top-ranked programs expect strong scores regardless of optional status
Reason 2: Strengthen Profile	If GPA is below program average (e.g., 3.2 vs. 3.5 typical)
Reason 3: Career Transition	Changing fields—scores show quantitative/analytical capability
Reason 4: Scholarship Eligibility	Many programs award funding based on GRE scores

When to Skip the GRE

Reason 1: GPA Above Average	Transcripts are already strong; program waives for high GPA
Reason 2: Program Explicitly Waives	Clearly states test-optional or test-not-required
Reason 3: Time or Resource Constraints	Limited prep time; funds better allocated elsewhere
Reason 4: Your Profile Strong Without It	Excellent work experience, publications, recommendations sufficient

BOTTOM LINE
 Research thoroughly. If optional, GRE is optional for a reason—many admitted students don't submit. Only invest if your program typically rewards it or your profile needs strengthening.

List 3-5 graduate programs you're considering and their GRE policies:

Based on your profile, do you need the GRE? Why or why not?

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- Your Diagnostic Baseline

How to Take Your Diagnostic Test

- 1. Use one full-length Official GRE test under strict timed conditions
- 2. Test at the same time of day you plan to take the real GRE
- 3. Replicate test center environment: quiet room, no interruptions, one pencil, scratch paper
- 4. Complete all sections without skipping—even if you struggle
- 5. Score immediately to establish baseline across all three sections

Your Diagnostic Score Entry

Item	Your Score	Percentile Rank
Analytical Writing (Issue)	___/6	___
Analytical Writing (Argument)	___/6	___
Writing Combined	___/6	___
Verbal Reasoning (Section 1)	___/27	___
Verbal Reasoning (Section 2)	___/27	___
Verbal Score	130-170	___
Quantitative (Section 1)	___/27	___
Quantitative (Section 2)	___/27	___
Quantitative Score	130-170	___
TOTAL SCORE	260-340	___

Score Gap Reality Check

0-5 point gap	Manageable with focused prep; address specific weak question types
6-10 point gap	Requires 8-10 weeks focused study; identify content or timing issues
11-15 point gap	Ambitious but achievable; needs 12-16 weeks; consider tutoring
15+ point gap	Significant work needed; may require 4+ months intensive prep

Reflection & Target Setting

What surprised you most about your diagnostic score? Which section was strongest and why?

What is your target score for each section, and what timeline feels realistic?

Looking at percentiles, which section offers the highest ROI for improvement?

What barriers (time, anxiety, content gaps) might impact your prep?

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- Section Strategy: Verbal Reasoning

Question Types & Distribution

Question Type	Count (~)	Key Strategy
Text Completion	6	Predict answer before checking choices
Sentence Equivalence	4	Find two synonymous answers
Reading Comprehension (single)	5	Close reading; identify main idea
Reading Comprehension (paired)	6	Compare, contrast, synthesize across passages
Total Verbal Questions	40	60 minutes total across 2 sections

Vocabulary Strategy Table

Learn roots & prefixes	Understand Latin/Greek roots; deduce unfamiliar words in context
Read challenging academic texts	The Economist, scientific journals, philosophy essays match GRE tone
Build flashcard systems	Focus on GRE-frequency words; review daily
Study word families	Learn related forms: advocate (noun), advocacy (noun), advocate (verb)
Track your misses	Record missed vocabulary; revisit weekly until mastered

Text Completion Strategy

- Step 1: Read the entire sentence first—do NOT jump to blanks
- Step 2: Identify the logical direction (positive/negative, cause/effect)
- Step 3: Predict your own answer before looking at choices
- Step 4: Eliminate choices that contradict logic; choose best match to your prediction

Reading Comprehension Strategy

- 1. Skim actively: note main idea, author's position, and structure before answering
- 2. Read questions first only if you prefer; most benefit from reading passage first
- 3. Mark or annotate key claims, counterarguments, and evidence
- 4. For detail questions, return to text—avoid relying on memory
- 5. Inference questions demand careful logic; beware of answers beyond passage scope

Pacing & Section Timing

Allocate 1.5 minutes per Text Completion, 2-3 minutes per Sentence Equivalence, 3-4 minutes per Reading Comprehension question (including passage reading). Build speed with practice; accuracy first, speed second.

Which verbal question type is hardest for you, and why? What will you prioritize in prep?

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- Section Strategy: Quantitative Reasoning

Content Areas & Distribution

Content Area	Approximate %	Topics Covered
Arithmetic	25%	Integers, fractions, decimals, percentages, ratios, absolute value
Algebra	25%	Equations, inequalities, exponents, functions, polynomials
Geometry	25%	Lines, angles, triangles, polygons, circles, coordinate systems
Data Analysis	25%	Probability, statistics, distributions, graphs, interpretation

Question Type Breakdown

Quantitative Comparison (~8 per test)	Compare Column A vs. Column B; three possible relationships
Multiple Choice - Single Answer (~9 per test)	Select one correct answer from five choices
Multiple Choice - All That Apply (~2 per test)	Select all correct answers; no partial credit
Numeric Entry (~3 per test)	Enter your answer; no choices provided

Quantitative Comparison Strategy

- 1. Work algebraically when possible—avoid plugging in numbers initially
- 2. Look for patterns: if simplification reveals equality, $A=B$ before testing numbers
- 3. Test strategic numbers: zero, one, negatives, and large values to reveal patterns
- 4. Remember: 'Relationship cannot be determined' is correct only when different numbers yield different relationships

Math Content Refresher

Topic	High-Yield Focus Areas
Exponents & Roots	Simplification rules, negative/fractional exponents, $\sqrt{2}$ and $\sqrt{3}$ values
Quadratics	Factoring, FOIL, completing square, discriminant
Inequalities	Direction reversal with negatives, compound inequalities, graphing
Probability	Basic rules, combinations/permutations, independent vs. conditional
Averages & Statistics	Mean, median, mode; standard deviation concept; weighted averages
Geometry Formulas	Area, perimeter, volume; Pythagorean theorem; angle relationships

Calculator Policy & Strategy

On-screen calculator is available for all questions. Use it for computational accuracy on complex calculations (e.g., 47×0.085). However, rely on mathematical reasoning for problem-solving. The test assesses logical thinking, not calculation speed. Many problems intentionally appear complex but simplify algebraically—don't let the calculator seduce you into unnecessary computation.

	<p>STRATEGY TIP</p> <p>Estimate first. Calculate only when estimation isn't sufficient. The GRE rewards conceptual understanding over mechanical calculation.</p>
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Which quantitative content area is your weakness? What specific topics need review?

Analytical Writing Scoring Rubric

Score	Response Level	Characteristics
5-6	Good to Excellent	Insightful analysis, compelling evidence, clear organization, sophisticated prose
4	Adequate	Competent analysis, relevant evidence, acceptable organization, minor writing issues
3	Limited	Superficial analysis, weak evidence, unclear organization, frequent errors
2	Flawed	Confused reasoning, minimal evidence, disorganized, numerous errors
Below 3	Unscoreable	Incomprehensible, off-topic, or illegible

Essay Framework & Timing

Step	Time Allocation	Content	Process
Analyze prompt & plan	3-5 min	Identify thesis, brainstorm 2-3 examples	Outline main idea + supporting points
Introduction	2-3 min	Context + clear thesis statement	Signal your position immediately
Body Paragraph 1	6-8 min	Evidence + explanation of relevance	1-2 strong examples
Body Paragraph 2	6-8 min	Counter-perspective or additional example	Acknowledge nuance, refute objections
Conclusion	3-4 min	Restate thesis + reflect on implications	No new major points
Edit & proofread	1-2 min	Grammar, clarity, coherence	Fix obvious errors only

Building Effective Examples

- Use specific, relevant examples from history, literature, science, current events
- Hypothetical examples are acceptable if clearly labeled and logically sound
- Avoid lengthy narrative—focus on the point each example proves
- Aim for breadth: personal + public + academic examples show well-rounded thinking
- Don't force examples; skip weak ones and strengthen what remains

THE 5-MINUTE RULE

Write for 25 minutes, then spend final 5 minutes editing. If you haven't finished, leave final paragraph for editing; incomplete thoughts lose fewer points than grammar errors throughout.

Practice Prompt

Prompt: 'Universities should eliminate undergraduate business programs and instead make business education available only at the graduate level.'

Outline your position and identify 2-3 examples you'd use to support your argument:

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- Building Your Study Plan

Weekly Study Template

Day(s)	Focus	Duration	Activities
Monday-Wednesday	One section deep-dive	2 hours each	Content mastery + targeted practice
Thursday	Mixed section review	1.5 hours	Weak areas from week + bridging concepts
Friday-Saturday	Full practice test	4+ hours	Timed conditions, complete scoring analysis
Sunday	Error analysis & planning	2 hours	Detailed error log, plan next week's focus

Total: 10.5 hours per week. Adjust up or down based on target score and diagnostic gap.
Consistency beats intensity.

Six Core Study Principles

Principle 1: Active Mastery	Don't memorize; understand concepts deeply enough to teach them
Principle 2: Error Tracking	Every wrong answer deserves analysis: content gap vs. careless vs. timing
Principle 3: Spaced Repetition	Review weak areas weekly; don't skip to new content
Principle 4: Timed Practice	After first 2-3 weeks content review, practice under actual conditions
Principle 5: Section Balance	Don't abandon weaker section for stronger one—all three matter
Principle 6: Adaptive Difficulty	Once confident at baseline level, increase practice difficulty

	<p>RETURNING STUDENTS CALLOUT</p> <p>If retaking after 6+ months, start with a fresh diagnostic. Skills fade; target score benchmarks may have shifted.</p>
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10-Session Prep Plan (Weeks 1-10)

Session	Focus Area	Coverage	Homework
1	Diagnostic & Verbal Intro	Assess baseline, Text Completion basics	Read challenging articles, start vocab flashcards
2	Verbal Content Deep-Dive	Text Completion & Sentence Equivalence strategies	20 practice questions per type + flashcards
3	Reading Comprehension Fundamentals	Active reading technique, main idea identification	3 short passages (5 questions each), flashcards
4	Quant Fundamentals Review	Arithmetic, algebra basics, calculator familiarity	20 arithmetic + 20 algebra practice questions
5	Quant Advanced Topics	Geometry, data interpretation, word problems	20 geometry + 20 data analysis questions
6	Full Practice Test #1	Timed complete test, identify patterns	Score analysis, error log initiation
7	Verbal Refinement	High-difficulty Reading Comp, synonym pairs	Difficult passage sets, vocab maintenance
8	Quant Refinement	Quantitative Comparison strategies, multi-part problems	QC practice sets, challenging word problems
9	Analytical Writing Intensive	Two full timed essays, rubric scoring	Essay 1 + Essay 2, peer or tutor feedback
10	Full Practice Test #2 + Review	Final timed test, review all high-miss categories	Score tracker, error pattern summary

When will you study each week? Create a realistic schedule and identify 1-2 non-negotiable study times:

What is your biggest obstacle to consistent study? How will you address it?

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- Practice Test Tracker & Error Log

Your Score Tracking

Test	AW Issue	AW Argument	Writing Avg	Verbal	Quant	Total Score
Diagnostic						
Practice 1						
Practice 2						
Practice 3						
Practice 4						
Practice 5						

Detailed Error Log (Track Every Mistake)

C = Careless/Silly Mistake	You knew the concept but misread, miscalculated, or rushed
G = Content Gap	You don't understand the underlying concept or formula
T = Timing Issue	You ran out of time before completing the question carefully
S = Strategy Gap	Right concept but chose wrong approach or missed efficient method
R = Reading Comprehension Error	Misunderstood question or passage intent

Pattern Analysis: Ask Yourself

Which error category appears most frequently? What does this tell you about how to prep?

Are errors concentrated in specific sections or question types? Which topic needs deepest attention?

Do you notice timing errors increasing as test difficulty increases? Is pacing your limiting factor?

- Test Day Preparation

Test Center vs. At-Home Options

Testing Center	At-Home Test
Professional proctoring	Live remote proctor
Controlled environment	Your home (quiet space required)
Fixed test schedules	Flexible scheduling (often same-day)
Transportation required	No travel needed
Standardized conditions	Your familiar space (may reduce anxiety)
Slightly higher cost typically	May be same or lower cost
No tech setup concerns	Requires stable internet, camera, microphone

The Week Before: Final Prep Checklist

- Review your error log—don't try to learn new content
- Complete 2-3 practice questions in each weak category daily
- Do NOT take another full practice test—you'll be overtested and fatigued
- Get 7-9 hours sleep nightly; shift sleep schedule if test is early morning
- Do light 30-minute review; avoid cramming or new material

Test Day Checklist

Item	Details	Status
ID & Admission Ticket	Bring photo ID (passport or license) and admission ticket/email confirmation	
Comfortable Clothing	Layers (room may be cold), nothing with logos or distracting patterns	
Meals & Hydration	Eat light breakfast 1-2 hours before; bring water/snacks for breaks	
Arrival Time	Arrive 15 minutes early to check in and settle	
At-Home Setup (if applicable)	Test internet 48 hours before; camera works; quiet space reserved	
Mindset	Remember: you've prepared well; this is execution, not proof of intelligence	

During the Test: Four Phases

- PHASE 1 - Analytical Writing (60 min)
- 30 min per essay; pace carefully; draft before writing final copy
- Prioritize clarity and organization over perfection
- PHASE 2 - Verbal Section 1 (30 min)
- Pace: 1.5 min per Text Completion, 3-4 min per Reading Comp question
- Don't dwell on hard questions; mark and return if time remains
- PHASE 3 - Quantitative Section 1 (35 min)
- Pace: 2 min per Quant Comparison, 2-3 min per multiple choice or numeric entry
- Use scratch paper for all work; don't rely on mental math for complex problems
- BREAK (10 min) — Breathe, hydrate, stretch
- PHASE 4 - Verbal & Quant Sections 2 (60 min total)
- Difficulty adjusts based on Section 1 performance; stay calm and focused

SCORE REPORTING

You see preliminary scores for Verbal/Quant immediately after test. Official AWA scores arrive via email 10-15 days later. You can choose which scores to send to schools (ScoreSelect option), so one low score won't ruin multiple applications.

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- Score Strategy & Application Planning

Understanding Your Score & Competitiveness

Score Range	Percentile	Interpretation	Action
160+	85-99	Highly competitive for top programs	Apply to reach + target schools
150-159	60-85	Competitive for many programs	Apply strategically; ensure fit
140-149	30-60	Below average to moderate	Assess program averages carefully
Below 140	<30	Below competitive for grad admissions	Consider retake; verify program requirements

The GRE ScoreSelect Option

- Option 1: Send Highest Scores
- Default; ETS sends your best overall score (best Verbal + best Quant, regardless of test date)
- Option 2: Send All Scores
- Transparent; schools see all attempts (some prefer this honesty)
- Option 3: Send Select Scores (by test date)
- Send only scores from specific test dates; hide lower attempts

Retake Policy & Strategy

Retake Frequency	Can retake every 21 days; up to 5 times in rolling 12-month window
Score Validity	Scores valid for 5 years from test date
Admissions Perspective	Most schools ignore all but highest score; retakes show determination
Cost Consideration	Each attempt costs \$205; weigh score improvement vs. application fees to schools

Application Timeline & GRE Positioning

Timeline	GRE Action	Application Status
Aug-Sept	Diagnostic + full-paced prep begins	Research programs; note GRE deadlines
Oct-Nov	Finalize target score; take 1st official GRE	Start applications (some schools rolling admission)
Dec-Jan	Review score; decide retake if needed	Submit apps with highest score; note retake deadlines
Feb-March	Second GRE attempt (if retaking)	Final application deadlines; await decisions
April-May	All GRE attempts completed	Final decision period; commit to program

Your Testing Plan & Application Strategy

What is your target program list (3-5 schools)? What are their typical GRE score ranges?

Based on those benchmarks, what is your realistic target score? Timeline?

Will you take the GRE once or plan for a potential retake? What trigger would prompt retaking?

What other application components (GPA, work experience, recommendations) strengthen your candidacy?

RELATED RESOURCES

- ETS Official GRE Prep Plus: www.ets.org/gre
- Manhattan Prep GRE (commercial resource): www.manhattanprep.com
- Graduate programs GRE reporting: Each school's admissions office for specifics
- GRE Argument Essay Prompts: Released by ETS (study the bank of 155 possible topics)
- Verbal Reasoning Word Lists: Focus on 1,000-word GRE-frequency vocabulary

You've got this. Preparation + strategy + determination = success. Good luck.