

# Introduction to the GRE

Hello, and welcome to *The GRE Trainer*. My name is Mike Kim, and I'll be your instructor. I understand how important success on the GRE is to your future, and I've done everything I can to make this study guide the most effective resource it can be. Thank you for putting your trust in me; I'm excited to get started with you.

In this introductory chapter, I'll review the basics of the GRE, such as how to register and the different sections of the exam. I'll also explain how this study guide is organized. Additionally, I'll offer advice to ensure that your study time is effective and that you will put yourself in a position to achieve your best possible score.

## About the GRE

The GRE consists of five main sections: an essay section, two scored verbal sections, and two scored quantitative sections. In September 2023, Educational Testing Service (ETS), the makers of the GRE, significantly updated the exam and shortened it from nearly four hours to just under two hours. All the information in this guide relates to the most recent format of the GRE.

### The Essay Section

The essay section consists of one “Analyze an Issue” essay. You will have 30 minutes to complete the essay, which is scored on a scale of 0–6 in half-point increments. For more information on the essay section, please refer to Chapter 22.

### The Verbal Sections

The two scored verbal sections each consist of 27 questions: 12 questions in the first section and 15 in the second section. You will receive a total of 41 minutes (18 minutes for the first section and 23 minutes for the second section) to complete the verbal sections. There are three types of verbal questions:

- Text completion: requires you to fill in blank spaces in a sentence with the best of provided choices
- Sentence equivalence: requires you to fill in a blank space in a sentence with two synonymous words from a list
- Reading comprehension: tests your ability to understand and interpret text

The questions within each section are static; that is, they are preset and do not change based on your performance. You can jump around and return to any of the previous questions. However, the test is adaptive from section to section—how you perform on the first verbal section will determine the difficulty level of your second verbal section. You actually want to get to as difficult a second verbal section as possible in order to maximize your score, as the grading scale gets more forgiving as the difficulty increases.

**The Quantitative Sections**

Similar to the verbal sections, the two scored quantitative sections each consist of 27 questions: 12 questions in the first section and 15 in the second section. Unlike the verbal sections, you will have 47 minutes in total to complete the two sections (21 minutes for the first section and 26 minutes for the second section). The questions in this section do not test advanced math concepts; rather, they are based on math that you likely learned in high school or earlier: arithmetic, number properties, algebra, geometry, and data analysis.

The question types are multiple choice with one correct answer, multiple choice with one or more correct answers, numeric entry questions for which you have to fill in the answers, and quantitative comparison questions for which you are asked to compare two quantities. For more information on each of these different question types, please refer to Chapter 2.

Similar to the verbal sections, each quantitative section is static, and you can jump around, skipping and returning to questions as you wish; however, the test as a whole is adaptive, and how you perform on the first quantitative section will determine the difficulty level of the second quantitative section.

**How the Verbal and Quantitative Sections Are Scored**

The verbal and quantitative sections are scored on separate 130–170 scales. Each scaled score corresponds to a percentile rank reflecting a comparison with other test takers. Below is a sample of scaled scores and corresponding percentiles for a particular administration of the exam.

Scaled Score	Verbal Reasoning	Quantitative Reasoning
170	99	94
166	96	80
162	89	68
158	77	55
154	60	42
150	41	30

Data based on performance of individuals who tested between July 1, 2019, and June 30, 2022.

Each question within a section has the same weight, and there is no guessing penalty. **Therefore, never leave questions unanswered.** I also recommend you do not overinvest time on some questions at the expense of missing others, and you should practice allocating your time in a way that allows you to maximize your potential gains. You'll practice and develop these strategies with this guide.

## Importance to Admissions

The importance of the GRE to admissions varies based on the type of graduate program to which you are applying and your particular circumstances. Additionally, different types of graduate programs emphasize different parts of your score (e.g., some science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) programs may expect a relatively high quantitative reasoning score). Finally, there may be other considerations, such as grants or financial aid, in which GRE scores are used as selection criteria and thus serve as an added incentive to achieve your best score.

As you probably know, because each situation varies, I encourage you to research how much weight the GRE will have in your specific circumstances to determine if you should prioritize studying for a particular section of the test.

## Registering for the Exam

You can register for the exam at: [ets.org/gre/test-takers/general-test/register.html](https://ets.org/gre/test-takers/general-test/register.html)

As of the writing of this guide, the cost of taking the GRE is \$220 in the United States and varies slightly in other locations. You can take the exam at a testing center or at home (the at-home option generally offers greater flexibility and availability in terms of both date and time). Although the exam content is identical for either option, there are some minor differences in the overall testing experience, such as the involvement of online proctoring methods, that you may want to research ahead of time. Another notable difference is that you are expected to work with a whiteboard (or sheet of paper inside a transparent sheet protector) and dry-erase markers for the at-home option instead of the scratch paper and pencil you would use at a test center.

You can take the GRE once every 21 days and up to five times within any continuous 12-month period. This limitation applies even if you've canceled one or more of your scores within that period.

## Reporting Your Scores

As of this writing, ETS offers a few different options for reporting your GRE scores on test day and afterward.

**On test day**, if you choose not to cancel after viewing your scores at the test center, you can designate up to four schools to receive your scores at no additional cost. You can choose to send either only the score you **just received** or **all scores** for all the GREs you have taken over the past five years.

**After test day**, you can send your scores to additional schools for a fee. In this case, you can choose to send either your **most recent** score or **any selection** of scores from any GREs you have taken over the past five years.

## How to Study for the GRE

**The GRE is a very learnable exam.** It is not a test of advanced reasoning ability, it does not include any questions that encourage ingenuity or “outside the box” thinking, and it is not designed to give an advantage to those with unique training in any particular field.

**As long as you have the time and the motivation, you should expect that your studies will lead to significant score improvement.** I have written this book to help make sure that you achieve this goal.

**Throughout the study process, some students may not see significant score improvement.** Why not? And, more important, how can we make sure this doesn’t happen to you?

**I recommend thinking of your studies as a three-legged stool that consists of learning, practice, and self-assessment.** Whether you study for one month or six months, the key to your success depends on coordinating these three components. If you miss one of these key components, it can disrupt your entire study process. Let’s discuss each individually in more detail and then bring them together again.

### Learning

Learning for the GRE consists of learning about the GRE and learning about the concepts *tested* on the GRE.

Learning about the GRE involves understanding the different question types and how they work, including their tendencies and nuances. I will give you the most important details in this book, and you will pick up more details on your own throughout your exam preparation.

The study process also involves learning optimal strategies for all the different challenges the GRE presents. If you are new to the GRE, you will quickly discover that it is not chess—it does not require complex strategies, and in fact, overthinking your strategies can often be detrimental to your performance. However, you should develop smart strategies for approaching the challenges you expect to encounter on the GRE and master them through practice before test day. I will expand on this point later in this section.

Most importantly, preparation for the GRE involves learning the underlying content tested in the verbal and quantitative sections. For the verbal sections, a key factor is simply vocabulary, so I encourage you to enhance your vocabulary while studying for the GRE. For the quantitative sections, you will need to understand the underlying math rules, which I will cover in great detail in this guide.

## **Practice**

The second key component of your GRE preparation is practice. The most realistic GRE practice is obtained using the official GRE materials. Of course, you will also obtain much practice with this study guide.

Performing well on the GRE requires an understanding of the underlying material. However, your practice is the “muscle-building” component of your training—it is how you develop the skills and habits that will help you perform better on the exam.

Ideally, you want targeted and mixed practice: a set of geometry questions is an example of targeted practice, and a practice test is an example of mixed practice. Make sure that you know which questions to use for any situation. Again, this study guide has been designed to give you plenty of experience with both.

I recommend you avoid burning through official questions and tests created and released by ETS, the makers of the exam. Although I provide materials that mimic the official exam, materials created by the actual test writers will best approximate what you’ll see on test day. ETS offers a limited sample of practice questions and tests. These official questions offer the most important clues to your eventual success, and you will want to maximize their benefit. You can use official questions to find out what to expect on test day and to deepen your understanding of the question types, the underlying issues, how these issues are tested, and your strengths and weaknesses.

## **Combining the *Trainer* with Official Practice Materials**

As discussed, the most accurate GRE preparation materials are those created by ETS, the actual makers of the GRE. Unfortunately, they offer students a limited amount of study materials. So, it’s important to make sure you understand the options available to you and to maximize the utility you get from all the materials at your disposal.

As of this writing, on the ETS website, students are offered five practice exams and a new program titled GRE Mentor. Two of the five practice exams are free, and three require an additional fee of \$39.95 per exam. GRE Mentor, for \$100, offers access to the largest bank of GRE questions available—as of this writing, 640 official questions, an additional official exam (that you could purchase separately otherwise), and additional instructional materials.

In addition, ETS offers official printed guides: one large guide that covers the test as a whole and two smaller guides that focus on the quantitative and verbal sections, respectively.

When you combine your learning in the *Trainer* with your practice with official materials, my advice is twofold:

(1) Focus more on learning earlier in your studies and more on practice later in your studies.

(2) Whenever possible or helpful, cycle between the two so that your learning impacts your practice, and your practice drives what you choose to study.

### **Suggestion: Create a GRE Notebook**

An effective GRE notebook can be an invaluable tool during your study process. It can help you cement your learning and work as a database of essential material, and it can serve as a road map to a higher score.

Here are a couple of key suggestions for optimizing the use of a study notebook:

1. Write down every challenge you face in both *The GRE Trainer* and official preparation material (e.g., the way a challenging question was written, a difficult concept or vocabulary term, a math concept you have not applied in years). Try not to stress too much when you encounter a challenge. Just do your best to describe, as honestly as possible, why it is problematic for you.

As you study, work to eliminate these challenges. Keep returning to your notebook, and use it as your guide. Each time you overcome a challenge, you will get better at the exam. Trust that many of these issues will resolve themselves, and you will learn and develop smarter ways to address the remaining issues. Work to “fix” each problem that you write down, and by the time you have resolved each of these issues, you will be ready for the test.

2. Think of your notes as constantly evolving. Be comfortable with messy notes and multiple drafts. I recommend that you take notes in a format that makes them easy to work with and move, such as loose-leaf paper in three-ring binders. If you follow these steps, by the end of this process, your notes, while not perfect, will tell the story of your study journey. You may be proud of how messy your notes became! Correctly answering questions may make you feel good, but working on challenges will lead to improvement in the long run, and the messiness can often be a testament to that hard work.

## Self-Assessment

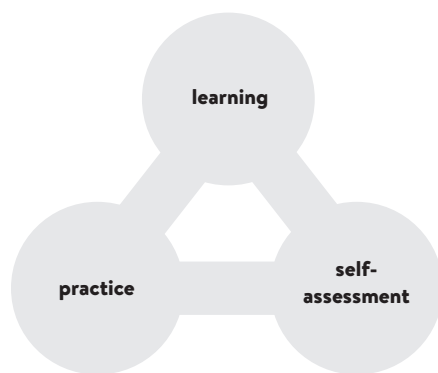
The final component of your GRE preparation is self-assessment. By evaluating your aptitude for the exam, your strengths and weaknesses, and your skills and habits, you can adjust your learning and practice to address your particular needs and to best serve your interests.

You can divide your self-assessment into two components: (1) what needs to be assessed and (2) your own assessment of your readiness. For example, one category to consider would be (1) different types of math concepts and (2) your comfort level with each of these concepts. You can also think more broadly in terms of issues such as vocabulary or verbal question types.

Note the difference between self-assessment and personal bias. You might believe you are strong or weak at math or have traditionally performed better in English classes than in quantitative classes, but results on standardized tests such as the GRE often do not align with expectations. Be as clinical as possible, recognize that this exam is learnable, and know that the study preparation will require you to invest time, effort, and energy. Use self-assessment to know where to concentrate that energy.

## Bringing it All Together

Test takers underperform relative to their capacities when they cannot or do not prepare. They also underperform when they do not prepare as efficiently or as effectively as they might have. I want to help you avoid these barriers to success and maximize the returns you get for the work you put in.



Students who underperform relative to their efforts often do so because they failed to address one or more of these three critical components (learning, practice, and self-assessment) or failed to combine them, leading to the classic image of a rocky stool. Examples are a student who devotes all her exam preparation to attending courses and reading guides but does not practice or review or a student who takes numerous practice tests without mastering the underlying mathematical concepts.

Exam preparation is effective when learning, practice, and self-assessment come together—when the material that is learned informs how you solve problems, when your experiences with questions deepen your understanding of the material, and when you understand and build on your strengths and weaknesses. **Every time you form a bond between these components, you get better at the GRE.**

## Looking Ahead

In the next lesson, I'll begin by reviewing the basics of the quantitative sections and then move to six quantitative chapters that cover arithmetic and algebra.

Then, I will move on to a block of seven verbal lessons, reviewing all that you need to know about text completion, sentence equivalence, and reading comprehension.

Next, I will return for the second half of the math instruction, which will include data analysis and geometry.

I will then conclude with a lesson on the essay and some additional verbal practice.

A few months of concentrated studying for the GRE may be the key to opening doors that might be significantly harder to open otherwise. I am excited to join you on this journey. Let's get started.