

Five Steps to Take BEFORE You Study for the GRE

by Kevin Klein

November 19, 2004

As a GRE prep course instructor, I've often wished I could catch students two months before the class starts and give them a list of things to do before they even begin studying. Here is that list.

1. Find out the test-score expectations of the colleges you'll apply to.

It seems obvious, but I'm always surprised at how many students have no idea how well they need to do to get into the schools they're targeting. Some humanities-related graduate programs don't care about the GRE's Quantitative section; other programs may not even look at the Analytical Writing portion. Find out from the graduate secretary—or preferably, from a faculty member—if the admissions committee judges GRE scores based on percentiles of each section, individual scaled scores, combined scaled scores, or on some other criteria.

2. Take a practice test to find out your current performance.

Yes, it's usually disheartening to see just exactly how much you need to study. But how else are you going to know which areas you should focus on the most?

The official GRE website offers a free download of its PowerPrep software, which comes with two practice tests. The tests will give you a scaled score for the Verbal and Quantitative sections, but it can't rate your Analytical Writing essay. You can, however, have two essays graded online through ScoreItNow, a low-cost service provided by ETS, the makers of the GRE. Both PowerPrep and ScoreItNow are available on the GRE website at <http://www.gre.org>.

3. Register for a test date.

It's important to do this a few months before you take the test. The GRE test-taking facility nearest you may be a small learning center, in which case the few spaces will fill up fast as application deadlines approach. Registering early will give you better scheduling options as well as an exact knowledge of how much time you have to prepare. Test registration information can also be found on the GRE website, <http://www.gre.org>.

4. Set specific, realistic study goals, and choose methods according to how you study best.

The preceding three steps will inform you of your GRE-readiness: where you're at, where you need to be, and how much time you have to get there. The next step is determining how you'll do it.

Study goals and methods are successful to the extent that they're personal. Are you driven by achievement? Set score-based goals and use a study manual to take practice tests until you reach those scores. Do you work well on a schedule? Set a time-based goal to study for a half-hour per day or three hours per week. Do you dislike doing things according to the clock? Set a material-based goal to study thirty vocabulary words a day or write two essays a week. Remember to make short-term goals with rewards along the way. For example, if you stick to your study plan for two weeks straight, treat yourself meaningfully (if I'm honest, for me that would mean taking an afternoon off to read whatever I want to. Whoa there, party animal!) In terms of motivation to study, the GRE test itself isn't what you'd call positive reinforcement.

As for study methods, ask yourself how you learn best. It sounds pretty intuitive, but again, fear can keep you from working smart. Many people who don't like speaking up in a classroom setting nevertheless endure a test-prep course because they know they need structured help. If you don't like large groups, consider hiring a tutor. Your per-hour costs are more expensive than in a prep course, but you get much more out of each hour with a good tutor.

There are a range of study manuals for sale, and there is also good free help online. Searching on Google for "free GRE prep" will present you with many options. One is www.grevocabulary.com, a site I designed to give students free and cost-based resources for studying GRE vocabulary effectively.

5. Take a positive-outcome mindset to your study material.

When you're studying for the GRE, *you can't go wrong*. Getting practice questions right feels good; getting them wrong doesn't feel so good, but it's a better chance to make progress. Gear yourself up for efficient study by believing that no matter the outcome, you can't go wrong.

If you miss fifteen questions in a row and feel overwhelmed by despair and insecurity, that's normal. Sit in the pain, take a short break, and keep studying. The worst thing you can do is beat yourself up. Let's say you forget the Pythagorean theorem on a Quantitative practice question and tell yourself you're an idiot. Guess what gets paired in your mind with the little picture of a right triangle? The feeling of the word "idiot," which can drown out $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$, especially on test day.

After reading these five steps, probably the best thing to do is take a deep breath and exhale slowly. Don't think of this list as adding even more tasks to your overburdened school and graduate application load. Remember, you probably don't have time to work any harder right now, but you can work smarter. These five steps help because they ultimately save much more time than they take.