

The GRE Analytical Writing Section

About this document:

The questions used as examples in this document come from the pool of actual GRE test questions posted by Educational Testing Service (ETS), the makers of the GRE (see URLs of topics below). This document is offered for exclusively educational purposes and may not be sold.

GRE Analytical Writing Section Overview:

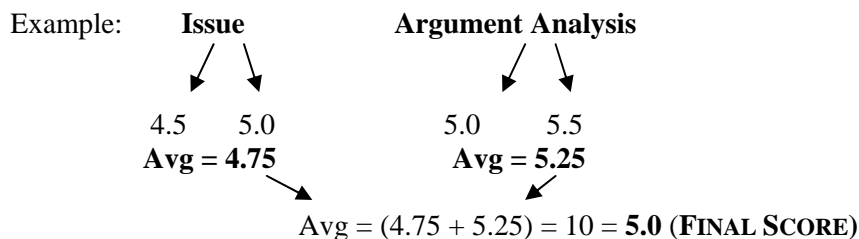
- The Analytical Writing Section consists of two essays: the Argument Analysis (30 min.) and the Issue Essay (45 min).
- The Argument topic is assigned to you; for the Issue Essay, you may choose one of two presented topics. For a complete listing of all possible writing topics, visit the GRE.org website at

<http://www.gre.org/argutop.html> —and— <http://www.gre.org/issuetop.html>

—Why would they let you see all the topics they choose from? Because there are a **lot** of them, and if you take the time to familiarize yourself with all of them, then you probably deserve a good score.

Scoring

- Your traditional writing skills (grammar & punctuation) aren't as important as your *thinking* abilities as demonstrated in your writing. This document will help you develop these thinking abilities.
- How long do the essays have to be? Long and short enough to be thorough without rambling
- Your essays are scored accordingly:
 - First, each essay is given a rating of 0-6.0, in half-point increments, by two trained
 - Second, those two scores are averaged, unless there's a discrepancy larger than one full point (e.g., 3.5 and 5.0) between them, in which case a third reader gives it a score, and the higher two scores are taken.
 - Third, your averaged score for each of the two essays are themselves averaged, and that averaged score is rounded up to the nearest half-point, from 0 to 6.0. This is your final score.



Here is a breakdown of scores and percentiles for the first five months (Oct. 2002 through Feb. 2003) of the Writing Section's history:

| Score | % Scoring Below | Score | % Scoring Below |
|-------|-----------------|-------|-----------------|
| 6.0 | 95 | 3.0 | 6 |
| 5.5 | 84 | 2.5 | 2 |
| 5.0 | 67 | 2.0 | 1 |
| 4.5 | 47 | 1.5 | 0 |
| 4.0 | 28 | 1.0 | 0 |
| 3.5 | 14 | 0 | 0 |

Source: <http://www.gre.org/interpret.html>. 10 July 2003.

Assumptions: the basis of logical argumentation

We make assumptions to generalize the evidence we have at hand (advice from a friend, crime stats in the paper, the statement of an authority figure, our own experience) to new situations. If our conclusion is too strong or weak for the evidence, it will show up in the assumptions of our argument.

Identifying assumptions is particularly useful for the Argument Analysis essay because the essay question presents you with an argument, consisting of stated evidence and conclusion(s), and asks you to **“Discuss how well reasoned you find this argument.”** Identifying and evaluating the unstated assumptions of that argument is your best method to do so.

For the purposes of illustration, here is an argument much too simple—and socially problematic—to be in a GRE question:

| Evidence | Conclusion | Assumption(s) |
|--|---|---|
| I just hit my little brother, and he started crying. | Hitting my brother at that exact moment made her cry. | Hitting him made him cry. (Not useful—almost the same as the conclusion) |
| I just hit my little brother, and he started crying. | Whenever I hit anyone, they will always cry. | 1. How my brother reacted to this one incident is how he will always react to the same incident in the future 2. How my brother reacts to getting hit is how everyone will react to it |
| I just hit my little brother, and he started crying. | He doesn't like getting hit | 1. My brother's crying is a sign of displeasure 2. My brother's crying is directly related to my hitting him |

- Which of these three examples provides the most useful conclusion? The answer is in the assumptions. The last example is best because its conclusion avoids saying nothing useful (the problem with #1) without trying to apply the evidence too broadly (#2).

Practice: Examine the following statements pairing evidence and conclusions. 1) Identify assumption(s), and 2) Evaluate the logical validity of each statement

Example: Of course he's a good guy, Mom! He pays for dinner every time he asks me out!

- 1) The assumption is that one of the defining characteristics of a "good guy" is that he pays for dinner when he asks a girl out.
- 2) This doesn't seem to be a very valid statement because it seeks to establish a character assessment ("good guy") based on a single piece of evidence ("pays for dinner when he asks me out").

1. Judge Jones would be hard to trust as a Supreme Court Justice because of her recent record of using her political status to avoid paying for traffic tickets.

2. You can either stand at attention during the national anthem or you can leave the country.

3. I know you gave us this assignment two weeks ago, but I didn't do it because I went into a coma that night and only woke up three hours ago.

4. Well, Professor Jenkins says that Atlantis really existed, and he has a PhD in English.

5. What do you mean you can't find my thyroid glands? You're a doctor, aren't you?

6. Homeless people and welfare recipients are that way because they don't want to work.

The Argument Analysis Essay

- The Analytical Writing Section consists of two essays, an Argument Analysis and an Issue essay
- For the Argument Analysis, you'll have 30 minutes to **“Discuss how well reasoned you find this argument.”** Here is a typical argument:

The following appeared in a memorandum from a dean at Omega University.

“Fifteen years ago, Omega University implemented a new procedure that encouraged students to evaluate the teaching effectiveness of all their professors. Since that time, Omega professors have begun to assign higher grades in their classes, and overall student grade averages at Omega have risen by thirty percent. Potential employers apparently believe the grades at Omega are inflated; this would explain why Omega graduates have not been as successful at getting jobs as have graduates from nearby Alpha University. To enable its graduates to secure better jobs, Omega University should now terminate student evaluation of professors.”

Step 1: How “well reasoned” an argument is means how good its assumptions are. Begin by identifying the argument’s position, then examine its E-C-A:

Position: Omega U. should terminate student evaluations because they’re hindering its graduates from getting jobs.

| Evidence | Conclusion | Assumptions |
|--|--|---|
| Grades averages have risen 30% since the student evals 15 yrs ago | Student evals caused grade inflation by worrying profs | The increase in grade avg. can be explained solely by the evals’ pressure on the profs |
| Omega U. grads aren’t as successful in job-finding as Alpha U. grads | Potential employers aren’t hiring Omega grads because they think their grades are inflated | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Alpha U’s grade averages aren’t as high, or haven’t risen as high, as Omega’s 2. A & O grads can be accurately compared—same college exp. going for the same jobs 3. Grades are the primary criterion for decisions about hiring college grads 4. <i>What else?</i> |

Step 2: What alternative explanations (meaning, besides the argument’s conclusion) could account for the evidence presented? Or, what are some other more- or equally-plausible assumptions?

ECA #1 above: Grades could have increased because an enrollment cap caused admissions to be more selective, thus bringing in increasingly higher-achieving students.

What else?

ECA #2: Omega U grads could be less successful than Alpha U grads because the two schools have different educational aims: Alpha U could educate mainly white-collar workers, while Omega U. could have a more scientific-research bent. If the local jobs available are mostly white-collar, then of course Alpha will place more grads.

What else?

Step 3: Writing the Argument Analysis

First Paragraph: rephrase argument & recommendation, evaluate it, & briefly explain your evaluation

This argument maintains that Omega U. grads are having difficulties finding jobs because employers think their grades have been inflated. It relies on the fact that Omega U's grade averages have risen 30% in the 15 years since student evaluations were introduced, and also on a comparison with the job-finding success of grads from nearby Alpha U. Based on this evidence, the author of the argument believes that the student evaluations are causing the lack of employment success of Omega grads and should be eliminated. When we examine the argument's assumptions, however, it is apparent that many other factors could account for the plight of Omega grads, and that more information should be gathered before a solution is implemented.

Second/Third/Fourth/etc: Body paragraphs: Specific support of explanation

First of all, the 30% rise in Omega U's grade average since the student evals were implemented 15 years ago could have come about by factors other than just the evaluations...

Second, the comparison of Omega grads to Alpha grads has several potential holes...

Conclusion: Restate your position; suggest improvements for the argument

While the student evals may be a factor contributing to Omega's rise in grades, more information must be gathered before concluding that stopping them will bring about a higher hiring rate for Omega grads. Even if the evaluations do prove to be the major cause of the grade increase, research would still need to demonstrate that employers aren't hiring Omega grads largely because of their "inflated" grades. In order to make this demonstration, surveys of potential Omega-grad employers regarding their opinion of the quality of an Omega education, as well as their impressions of the Omega grads they've interviewed, would serve as stronger evidence than a blanket comparison to the more employable Alpha U. grads.

—For the complete pool of Argument Analysis topics, go to www.gre.org/argutop.html

Using E-C-A with the Issue Essay

The Issue Essay instructions read, “Present your perspective on one of the issues below, using relevant reasons and/or examples to support your views.” According to the Scoring Guide, the main criteria are relevant evidence, clear focus (position), and good organization.

Step 1: Identify the Conclusions and Assumptions of the Issue Statement:

Government funding of the arts threatens the integrity of the arts.

| Evidence | Conclusion | Assumptions |
|-------------------------------|--|---|
| (Not given with Issue Essays) | Government funding (GF) threatens integrity of arts (IA) | An important component of IA is the source of funding (helps define <i>integrity</i>) GF threatens IA either as opposed to, or just more so than, private funding—there’s something inherently threatening to AI in GF. |

Step 2: Create your own ECA chart, providing your own evidence and the conclusions it allows you to make if your assumptions are valid. Start by asking two questions about the Issue prompt:

When is it true? When we define “gov’t funding” as 100% of what a dance troupe makes because no one pays to see them; when we define “threatens the integrity” as pushing artists toward creating propaganda for a government or advertising for a company—the inevitable result when an artist is “owned.” When we see gov’t funding as having the same effect that government monopolies on any industry have—i.e., lowering quality because of a lack of competition

When is it not true? When “gov’t funding” means only half or less of what an artist makes. Where an “artist” is not professional, i.e., dependent on income from their art. When it’s recognized that all professional artists have to worry about money anyway, and that whether the funding is gov’t or private, artists have to care about creating what will sell.

| Evidence | Conclusions | Assumptions |
|--|---|--|
| “Shock art” pieces that showcase NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) grant abuse | Gov’t funding is so large an enterprise that many “worthless” projects get funded | Art that offends, in some consensual way, qualifies as “integrity-threatening” |
| Most performing art groups (dance, theater) wouldn’t exist without GF | GF necessary for preservation of most perf. arts | Some performing arts that aren’t self-sustaining deserve to be sustained |

If you examine your own E-C-A and then use the results to determine your perspective on the issue, you’ll have a more accurate, sophisticated point of view than if you were to **see your options with blanket-statement, either-or thinking** (“Yes, GF threatens IA,” or “No, GF doesn’t threaten IA”). Instead your perspective will take into account the necessary complexity of the issue they present to you: **“Yes, if…” or “No, but…”**

—For the complete pool of Issue Essay topics, go to www.gre.org/issuetop.html