Writing Sample Guidelines

Graduate Record Examination (GRE®)

From the OWU Writing Center in the Sagan Academic Resource Center

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# Graduate Record Examination (GRE®) Writing Sample Guidelines

## Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essay at a Glance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Essay Prompts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style Guide/Writing Suggestions</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Essays</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice Prompts</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graduate Record Examination (GRE®)
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Essays at a Glance
The Analytical Writing section of the GRE consists of two timed essays: “Present Your Perspective on an Issue” (45 minutes) and “Analyze an Argument” (30 minutes). This section tests critical thinking and analytical writing skills, and assesses your ability to articulate and support complex ideas, analyze an argument, and sustain a focused and coherent discussion.

How important is the essay portion of the GRE?
Every school weighs this exam differently so it may be beneficial to you to find out from the schools you are applying to how strongly they consider the essay portion.

How are the GRE essays scored?
Paper-Based Test: Each response is scored holistically (as a whole based on overall quality, not on individual parts or skills) by two readers on a 6-point scale. If readers’ scores differ by more than one point, the essay is scored by a third reader. Scores on the two responses are averaged for the final score. Computer-Based Test: Each essay is scored by at least one trained reader, using a six-point holistic scale. The essay score is then reviewed by e-rater®, a computerized program. If the e-rater(R) evaluation and the human score agree, the human score is used as the final score. If they disagree, a second human score is obtained, and the final score is the average of the two human scores. http://www.ets.org/gre/general/scores/how/index.html

All essay responses (paper-based and computer-based) are reviewed by “essay-similarity-detection software” to identify essays or portions of essays that have been memorized or copied. http://www.ets.org/gre/general/scores/how/index.html

The average score on the GRE writing section for applicants to top private US universities is about 4.9 (2004-07). http://testprep.about.com/od/thegretest/a/Private_U_GRE_Scores.htm

Description of Essay Prompts
Prompt 1 – “Present Your Perspective on an Issue” (The Issue Essay)
Take a stand on a broad issue and create a compelling case for your own position using relevant reasons and examples. You will choose between two prompts.

Prompt 2 – “Analyze an Argument” (The Argument Essay)
Critique someone else’s argument. Consider the logical soundness of the argument and evaluate how the evidence is used. You will not have a choice of prompt for this task.

The ETS, which publishes and administers the GRE, provides the pool of topics from which the test prompts will be drawn on its Website: www.gre.org/pracmats.html

Organization
While the ETS does not provide a particular pattern of organization for your response, having a clear plan to follow will guide your writing task.
**Issue Essay:** Describe both sides of the issue and support your own position with reasons and/or examples. Here are three patterns of organization to consider:

**Pattern One**
Paragraph 1
Introduce both sides of the controversy
State your position
Paragraph 2
One reason for my belief is that ...
Paragraph 3
Another reason for my belief is ...
Paragraph 4
Perhaps the best reason is…
Paragraph 5
For all these reasons, I believe that…

**Pattern Two**
Paragraph 1
State both sides of the argument briefly before announcing your side
Paragraph 2
Support your argument with examples
Paragraph 3
Further support
Paragraph 4
Further support
Paragraph 5
Conclusion

**Pattern Three**
Paragraph 1
State your position
Paragraph 2
Acknowledge the arguments in favor of the other side
Paragraph 3
Rebut each of those arguments in order
Paragraph 4
Conclusion

**Argument Essay:** Do not take a stand; rather, evaluate the logic and soundness of the argument presented. Before you begin writing this essay, it is helpful to identify the following:

- **Premises** – the facts the author uses to back up his or her opinion
- **Conclusion** – the author’s position and recommendation for action
- **Assumptions** – unstated conditions that must be true in order for the argument to make sense. Assumptions create connections between the stated premises and the conclusion.

Here are two patterns of organization you might use for the Argument Essay:
**Pattern One**

Paragraph 1
Restate the argument.

Paragraph 2
Evaluate assumptions and premises:
First, the argument assumes that …
Second, the argument never addresses…
Finally, the argument omits…

Paragraph 3
Evaluate the conclusion
Thus, the argument is not completely sound. The evidence in support of the conclusion…

Paragraph 4
Offer ways to improve the argument
Ultimately, the argument might have been strengthened by…

**Pattern Two**

Paragraph 1
Restate the argument.

Paragraph 2
Discuss the link (or lack thereof) between the conclusion and the evidence presented in support of it.

Paragraph 3
Show two or three problems or flaws in the reasoning of the argument.

Paragraph 4
Show how each of the flaws could be eliminated by explicitly stating the missing assumptions.

**Style Guide/Writing Suggestions**

*Write in a clear, direct style and avoid major errors in mechanics and grammar.* Choose comfortable words, sentence structure, and organization. An essay full of mistakes will likely be marked down, but a few errors will be overlooked. Readers mostly focus on content, logic, and structure.

Use words and phrases that guide the readers (human and computer) through your evaluation of the argument.

**Premise words:** Because, since, if, given that, in view of, in light of, assume

**Conclusion words:** So, therefore, thus, hence, showed that, clearly, then, consequently, as a result, conclude that

**General transition words and phrases:**
- When entire paragraphs contradict each other: on the one hand/on the other hand OR the traditional view/the new view
- Number points: There are three reasons I believe that….. First… Second…. Third…
- To show you are about to support the main idea with examples or illustrations: for example, to illustrate, for instance, because
- To add another example or argument in support of the main idea: furthermore, in addition, similarly, just as, also, moreover
- To indicate that the idea you’re about to bring up is important, special, or surprising: surely, truly, undoubtedly, clearly, certainly, indeed, as a matter of fact, in fact, most important
- To signal that you’re about the reach a conclusion: therefore, in summary, consequently, hence, in conclusion, in short

**Sample Essays**

Following are examples of successful essays plus prompts and explanations of scores.

[The following complete essays, directions, and prompts and the original reader commentary are from “An Introduction to the Analytical Writing Section of the GRE General Test” published by the ETS at http://www.ets.org/Media/Tests/GRE/pdf/awintro.pdf]

**Essay I: Issue Essay**

**Directions:** You will have 45 minutes to plan and compose a response that presents your perspective on a topic you select. A response on any topic other that then one you select will receive a score of zero. You will have a choice between two Issue topics. Each topic will appear as a brief quotation that states or implies an issue of general interest. You are free to accept, reject, or qualify the claim made in the topic, as long as the ideas you present are clearly relevant to the topic you select. Support your views with reasons and examples drawn from such areas as your reading, experience, observations, or academic studies.

**Topic:** “In our time, specialists of all kinds are highly overrated. We need more generalists—people who can provide broad perspectives.”

**Response:** In this era of rapid social and technological change leading to increasing life complexity and psychological displacement, both positive and negative effects among persons in Western society call for a balance in which there are both specialists and generalists.

Specialists are necessary in order to allow society as a whole to properly and usefully assimilate the masses of new information and knowledge that have come out of research and have been widely disseminated through mass global media. As the head of Pharmacology at my university once said (and I paraphrase): “I can only research what I do because there are so many who have come before me to whom I can turn for basic knowledge. It is only because of each of the narrowly focussed individuals at each step that a full and true understanding of the complexities of life can be had. Each person can only hold enough knowledge to add one small rung to the ladder, but together we can climb to the moon.” This illustrates the point that our societies level of knowledge and technology is at a stage in which there simply must be specialists in order for our society to take advantage of the information available to us.

Simply put, without specialists, our society would find itself bogged down in the Sargasso sea of information overload. While it was fine for early physicists to learn and understand the few laws and ideas that existed during their times, now, no one individual can possibly digest and assimilate all of the knowledge in any given area.
On the other hand, over specialization means narrow foci in which people can lose the larger picture. No one can hope to understand the human body by only inspecting one's own toenails. What we learn from a narrow focus may be internally logically coherent but may be irrelevant or fallacious within the framework of a broader perspective. Further, if we inspect only our toe-nails, we may conclude that the whole body is hard and white. Useful conclusions and thus perhaps useful inventions must come by sharing among specialists. Simply throwing out various discoveries means we have a pile of useless discoveries, it is only when one can make with them a mosaic that we can see that they may form a picture.

Not only may over-specialization be dangerous in terms of the truth, purity and cohesion of knowledge, but it can also serve to drown moral or universal issues. Generalists and only generalists can see a broad enough picture to realize and introduce to the world the problems of the environment. With specialization, each person focuses on their research and their goals. Thus, industrialization, expansion, and new technologies are driven ahead. Meanwhile no individual can see the wholistic view of our global existence in which true advancement may mean stifling individual specialists for the greater good of all.

Finally, over-specialization in a people's daily lives and jobs has meant personal and psychological compartmentalization. People are forced into pigeon holes early in life (at least by university) and must conciously attempt to consume external forms of stimuli and information in order not to be lost in their small and isolated universe. Not only does this make for narrowly focused and generally properly-educated individuals, but it guarantees a sense of loss of community, often followed by a feeling of psychological displacement and personal dissatisfaction.

Without generalists, society becomes inward-looking and eventually inefficient. Without a society that recognizes the importance of brood-mindedness and for a for sharing generalities, individuals become isolated. Thus, while our form of society necessitates specialists, generalists are equally important. Specialists drive us forward in a series of thrusts while generalists make sure we are still on the jousting field and know what the stakes are.

Score Explanation for Issue Essay Response – Score 6
The following features earned this essay a score of 6:

- Outstanding analysis of the issue
- Insightful, well reasoned, highly effective use of language
- The introductory paragraph announces the writer's position on the issue and provides the context within which the writer will develop that position
- Compelling, well-organized arguments
- Careful line of reasoning strengthened by strong evidence and vivid metaphor
- Language is precise and often figurative
- Effective transitional phrases help organize the ideas and move the argument forward.
Essay II: Argument Essay

Directions: You will have 30 minutes to plan and write a critique of an argument presented in the form of a short passage. A critique of any other argument will receive a score of zero. Analyze the line of reasoning in the argument. Be sure to consider what, if any, questionable assumptions underlie the thinking and, if evidence is cited, how well it supports the conclusion.

Topic: “Hospital statistics regarding people who go to the emergency room after roller skating accidents indicate the need for more protective equipment. Within this group of people, 75 percent of those who had accidents in streets or parking lots were not wearing any protective clothing (helmets, knee pads, etc.) or any light-reflecting material (clip-on lights, glow-in-the-dark wrist pads, etc.). Clearly, these statistics indicate that by investing in high-quality protective gear and reflective equipment, roller skaters will greatly reduce their risk of being severely injured in an accident.”

Response: The notion that protective gear reduces the injuries suffered in accidents seems at first glance to be an obvious conclusion. After all, it is the intent of these products to either prevent accidents from occurring in the first place or to reduce the injuries suffered by the wearer should an accident occur. However, the conclusion that investing in high quality protective gear greatly reduces the risk of being severely injured in an accident may mask other (and potentially more significant) causes of injuries and may inspire people to over invest financially and psychologically in protective gear.

First of all, as mentioned in the argument, there are two distinct kinds of gear - preventative gear (such as light reflecting material) and protective gear (such as helmets). Preventative gear is intended to warn others, presumably for the most part motorists, of the presence of the roller skater. It works only if the “other” is a responsible and caring individual who will afford the skater the necessary space and attention.

Protective gear is intended to reduce the effect of any accident, whether it is caused by another, the skater or some force of nature. Protective gear does little, if anything, to prevent accidents but is presumed to reduce the injuries that occur in an accident. The statistics on injuries suffered by skaters would be more interesting if the skaters were grouped into those wearing no gear at all, those wearing protective gear only, those wearing preventative gear only and those wearing both. These statistics could provide skaters with a clearer understanding of which kinds of gear are more beneficial.

The argument above is weakened by the fact that it does not take into account the inherent differences between skaters who wear gear and those who do not. If is at least likely that those who wear gear may be generally more responsible and/or safety conscious individuals. The skaters who wear gear may be less likely to cause accidents through careless or dangerous behavior. It may, in fact, be their natural caution and responsibility that keeps them out of the emergency room rather than the gear itself. Also, the statistic above is based entirely on those who are skating in streets and parking lots which are relatively dangerous places to skate in the first place. People who are generally more safety conscious (and therefore more likely to wear gear) may choose to skate in safer areas such as parks or back yards.

The statistic also goes not differentiate between severity of injuries. The conclusion that safety gear prevents severe injuries suggests that it is presumed that people come to the emergency room only with severe injuries. This is certainly not the case. Also, given that skating
is a recreational activity that may be primarily engaged in during evenings and weekends (when doctors’ offices are closed), skaters with less severe injuries may be especially likely to come to the emergency room for treatment.

Finally, there is absolutely no evidence provided that high quality (and presumably more expensive) gear is any more beneficial than other kinds of gear. For example, a simple white t-shirt may provide the same preventative benefit as a higher quality, more expensive, shirt designed only for skating. Before skaters are encouraged to invest heavily in gear, a more complete understanding of the benefit provided by individual pieces of gear would be helpful.

The argument for safety gear based on emergency room statistics could provide important information and potentially saves lives. Before conclusions about the amount and kinds of investments that should be made in gear are reached, however, a more complete understanding of the benefits are needed. After all, a false confidence in ineffective gear could be just as dangerous as no gear at all.

Score Explanation for Essay Response – Score 6

The following features earned this essay a score of 6:

- Insightful analytical skills
- The introduction notes the topic’s fallacious reasoning
- Comprehensive examination of each of the argument’s root flaws
- The writer exposes several points that undermine the argument:
- The discussion is smoothly and logically organized, and
- Each point is thoroughly and cogently developed.
- The writing is succinct, economical, and generally error-free.
- Sentences are varied and complex
- The diction is expressive and precise

Practice Prompts

Below are some topics for you to write about for practice. At first, try writing without time limits. After you have written an untimed response or two, try writing within the 45 or 30-minute time limit imposed by the test.

For feedback and suggestions for improvement, schedule a meeting with a Writing Center Instructor. You can also evaluate your own essays by comparing them with the successful essays above. Also, follow a clear pattern of organization (see suggestions in the Organization section of this guide) and be sure the essays present:

- A Main Point
- Evidence
- Varied Sentence Structure
- Facility with Language

(The following prompts are from the ETS at http://www.ets.org/gre/general/prepare/sample_questions/analytical/issues/index.html and http://www.ets.org/gre/general/prepare/sample_questions/analytical/argument/index.html)
**Issue Essay**

"Laws should not be rigid or fixed. Instead, they should be flexible enough to take account of various circumstances, times, and places."

"The function of science is to reassure; the purpose of art is to upset. Therein lies the value of each."

"It is possible to pass laws that control or place limits on people's behavior, but legislation cannot reform human nature. Laws cannot change what is in people's hearts and minds."

"It is dangerous to trust only intelligence."

"If people disregard the great works of the past, it is because these works no longer answer the needs of the present."

"In the age of television, reading books is not as important as it once was. People can learn as much by watching television as they can by reading books."

**Argument Essay**

**Discuss how well reasoned you find the argument.**

A recent study shows that people living on the continent of North America suffer 9 times more chronic fatigue and 31 times more chronic depression than do people living on the continent of Asia. Interestingly, Asians, on average, eat 20 grams of soy per day, whereas North Americans eat virtually none. It turns out that soy contains phytochemicals called isoflavones, which have been found to possess disease–preventing properties. Thus, North Americans should consider eating soy on a regular basis as a way of preventing fatigue and depression.

In order to save a considerable amount of money, Rockingham's century-old town hall should be torn down and replaced by the larger and more energy-efficient building that some citizens have proposed. The old town hall is too small to comfortably accommodate the number of people who are employed by the town. In addition, it is very costly to heat the old hall in winter and cool it in summer. The new, larger building would be more energy efficient, costing less per square foot to heat and cool than the old hall. Furthermore, it would be possible to rent out some of the space in the new building, thereby generating income for the town of Rockingham.

Claitown University needs both affordable housing for its students and a way to fund the building of such housing. The best solution to this problem is to commission a famous architect known for experimental and futuristic buildings. It is common knowledge that tourists are willing to pay money to tour some of the architect's buildings, so it can be expected that tourists will want to visit this new building. The income from the fees charged to tourists will soon cover the building costs. Furthermore, such a building will attract new students as well as donations.
from alumni. And even though such a building will be much larger than our current need for student housing, part of the building can be used as office space.

As a result of numerous consumer complaints of dizziness and nausea, Promofoods requested that eight million cans of tuna be returned for testing last year. Promofoods concluded that the cans did not, after all, contain chemicals that posed a health risk. This conclusion is based on the fact that the chemists from Promofoods tested samples of the recalled cans and found that, of the eight chemicals most commonly blamed for causing symptoms of dizziness and nausea, five were not found in any of the tested cans. The chemists did find that the three remaining suspected chemicals are naturally found in all other kinds of canned foods.

People should not be misled by the advertising competition between Coldex and Cold-Away, both popular over-the-counter cold medications that anyone can purchase without a doctor's prescription. Each brand is accusing the other of causing some well-known, unwanted side effect: Coldex is known to contribute to existing high blood pressure and Cold-Away is known to cause drowsiness. But the choice should be clear for most health-conscious people: Cold-Away has been on the market for much longer and is used by more hospitals than is Coldex. Clearly, Cold-Away is more effective.

Sources