

KAPLAN AUTHOR SERIES

The New GRE<sup>®</sup>:  
Perspectives from a  
Standardized Test Junkie



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*About the author, Bob Verini:*

*“The New GRE: Perspectives from a Standardized Test Junkie” is a collection of short blogs written by Kaplan veteran Bob Verini. In his 30-plus years with Kaplan Test Prep, Bob has dissected just about every standardized test there is. He has helped thousands of students score higher on their exams, and is now responsible for training our Kaplan faculty on the best teaching methods, the ins-and-outs of tests, and the most common student pitfalls. When news of the new GRE broke, Bob’s passion for deconstructing standardized tests kicked in, and “The New GRE: Perspectives from a Standardized Test Junkie” shares his findings and advice for students with graduate school on their minds.*



## The New GRE: Perspectives from a Standardized Test Junkie

### The Test Format: New Functionality, Still Adaptive

One of the most notable changes in the new GRE, launching in 2011, is that **examinees will have the ability to move forward and backward within a section**, and even to **change answers** that they've already submitted. As you're probably aware, the current GRE only permits an examinee to move forward. Up to now, adaptivity – the algorithm's power to raise or lower the difficulty level of each successive question based on the student's previous result – has required that no one be able to return to previously-answered questions.

Interestingly, the **GRE is retaining its computer adaptive nature**. But in ways that could interest only the most committed psychometrician, it has evidently become sophisticated enough to allow examinees to flag questions, and to move past or come back to the flagged material, which still maintaining the integrity of the adaptive scoring.

If you were of a cynical turn of mind, you might respond, "Oh, great. They've spent all that money to give us the flexibility we always had when the test was paper-and-pencil." But trust me, cynicism (or indeed, negativity in general) isn't going to raise your score a single point. Instead, we can all applaud the forthcoming freedom temporarily to sidestep a gnarly problem and return to attack it later. **Test taker control will be enhanced**, and pressure will be reduced for high- and low-scorers alike.

As a side note, I should note that ETS has included the promise of "new preview and review capabilities within a section." This may be a euphemism for the spring ahead/fall back feature, or may herald even more examinee freedom.

### Verbal: Changes to Reading Comp Questions

While the GRE's overall content breakdown will remain the same for the 2011 test change – that is, it'll still consist of analytical writing, math, and verbal sections – the specific question types are undergoing quite the transformation. The most radical changes will be seen in the area of Reading Comprehension, where the testmakers are introducing two brand-new question types, both of which take fuller advantage of the computerized format than ever before.

The first new type consists of **multiple choice questions which have more than one possible answer**. This is a variation on the traditional “Roman numeral question”: You’ve seen those, surely, in which you are handed three Roman numeral statements and one or more are correct, e.g. “III only”; “I and II only”; “I, II, and III.” The killer tactic for Roman numerals has always been to begin with the one that appears most often, so as to narrow down your options. If, for instance, incorrect statement “III” appears in every answer choice except for (A), then the correct answer must be (A) by definition, case closed.

In the new type, “I,” “II,” and “III” will be replaced by “A,” “B,” and “C,” and any or all of them may be part of the answer. There will be no pre-set combinations to sort through. Moreover, the testmakers don’t plan to offer partial credit; as the ingenue sings in “Oklahoma!,” “it’s all er nuthin’.” The examinee will have to give equal and due attention to all three statements, without Roman numeral shortcut tactics to lean on.

The second new question type is **Select-in-Passage**, in which the examinee is to click on a specific passage sentence that matches up to a particular task. In other words, he’ll be asked to “Select the sentence that...” addresses a commonality between opposing views; or distinguishes between two phenomena; or shows why a hoped-for outcome won’t take place. This question type requires understanding not just a sentence’s content, but the author’s purpose in writing the sentence and placing it where she does. GRE Reading Comprehension questions have always rewarded an examinee’s focus on author purpose, but never more so than now.

Students will need to make sure they are fully prepared for these new question types. As should be pretty clear, these types require more complex thinking, and are less vulnerable to test taking shortcuts, than before. Those worried about having to deal with question types that haven’t appeared on any previous standardized tests need to remember that they can still take the current GRE up until July 31, 2011, and a score so achieved will be valid for five years after taking the exam.

Early test taking will be a highly desirable option for those who believe “the devil you know is better than the devil you don’t” – a proverb you’re likely to hear repeated often, as opportunities to take the GRE in its current form begin to dwindle.

### **Verbal: Out with Antonyms and Analogies – In with Something More Complex**

The 2011 GRE will eliminate two long-time Verbal Reasoning question types and introduce two new ones. Gone are Antonyms (pick the word with the opposite meaning), and Analogies (identify two pairs of words that feature the same relationship), in favor of variations on the familiar fill-in-the-blank challenge that will reward independent thinkers with supple vocabularies.

**Text Completion** is akin to the current GRE's "Sentence Completion" in that both feature individual sentences, one or more parts of which are missing, and the student's job is to fill in the blank or blanks. Here's the difference. On the current exam, if there are two blanks to fill, the examinee must choose among five pairs, e.g. "(A) separate...instill"; "(B) appeal...support"; and so on. Therefore, she can find shortcuts for narrowing down the possibilities. (For instance, if "support" won't fill blank #2, then there's no way (B) can be correct, irrespective of whether "appeal" is appropriate for the first blank.)

On the new GRE, some Text Completion questions will feature three blanks, instead of just two. But more significantly, the right word for each blank must be independently chosen from a pool of three (or more!) possibilities. The student still needs to know what the words mean and how they fit in context, but the venerable shortcuts no longer apply. And to put the cherry atop the sundae (or the rotting fish atop the pile of offal – your choice), if students miss one of the blanks while answering the other one(s) correctly, the entire problem will be marked as incorrect. You got it: no partial credit.

In **Sentence Equivalence** – the new question type that takes interesting advantage of the computer format – a sentence will contain a blank and a number of options for filling it. (There'll probably be six options, so the choices will likely be labeled A-F.) The interesting thing is that two of the six options will work, not just one. You as the test taker must identify both, and (again) there's no partial credit. So it does you no good to see that C will fit the bill unless you also see that E does, too.

In the wake of a revision that will be eliminating antonyms, Sentence Equivalence will place a greater emphasis on synonymy – understanding the similar meanings within and among word groups – than ever before. Thus (as I said at the outset), you'll be rewarded for your supple vocabulary or "word power," and more so than on any other current standardized test.

## **Quantitative: New Question Types**

When the new GRE is unveiled in 2011, the Quantitative Reasoning section will look awfully familiar to longtime test watchers (and we at Kaplan employ hundreds of them!). "QC's" – the well-known Quantitative Comparisons, comparing quantities in Columns A and B – will remain, as well as the most standard of all standardized test types: the math question with five answer choices, only one of which is correct.

Yet there'll be innovation as well. For one thing, *some quantitative multiple choice questions will have more than one possible answer* – and just as in GRE Reading Comprehension (discussed in an earlier posting), no partial credit will be offered. As an additional wrinkle, testmaker ETS is suggesting that sometimes they'll spell out exactly how many (as, for example, "Which two of the following are equivalent to  $x$  ?") and other times they'll leave it ambiguous, e.g. "Indicate all amounts that could be the average employee salary," followed by seven possibilities. Such questions won't respond to mere tactics – that is, one won't be able to narrow down possibilities creatively – though they'll continue to be vulnerable to the best strategic approaches and mindset.

Another new question type, **Numeric Entry**, is reminiscent of the paper-and-pencil SAT "grid-in" questions. Examinees will have no gridding or bubbling-in to do, of course, thanks to the computer format; when asked for the value of  $x$  one will have to type in "18.75" rather than select from among five choices. With no multiple choices to manipulate strategically or to eliminate when stuck, the advantage here goes to the examinee with a strong command of calculation.

GRE has always put a high priority on graph and data analysis, and **Data Interpretation** questions will continue that tradition, incorporating traditional multiple choice, "multiple right answer," and numeric entry questions. The GRE folks clearly want to reward prospective graduate students for their essential ability to read quantitative information presented visually.

## Quantitative: The Advent of the Calculator

Of all of the changes to the GRE, the one that excites most students is the addition of an onscreen calculator on Test Day. They are elated at the prospect of a reduced need for scratch paper, not to mention the reduced likelihood of errors caused by freehand number crunching. Today's students are, of course, generally comfortable with new technological solutions to a challenge, and many students are inclined to welcome them unquestioningly.

Yet it's possible that the calculator will not be an unmixed blessing. For one thing, we can anticipate that the GRE testmakers will write problems with the calculator in mind. Quantitative Comparisons will likely involve more variable manipulation, and Problem Solving questions are likely to get tougher now that the writers can incorporate more complex calculations than before. It's a good bet that when the dust settles after a few months, GRE watchers will agree that the difficulty level of the Quantitative Section will have risen, perhaps significantly so.

At the same time, there will surely be many math problems that don't lend themselves to calculator use. Those students who unquestioningly welcome technological means can be expected to rush to the calculator, even when doing so is inappropriate or when calculating by hand would actually be faster. Standardized tests are always set up to reward examinees for

their number cleverness, not for a lumbering cranking out of solutions, and sometimes on the new GRE it will simply be cleverer not to use the calculator.

So will the calculator have an effect on scores? If so, the effect isn't likely to be profound, once the problems themselves are adjusted to compensate for the ability to make quicker calculations. Thinking - that is, the ability to decide the best approach for a given problem at a given moment - will remain the skill the GRE is most eager to assess.

## **The Essays: Still Analytic, Requires More Attention to Detail**

Virtually every aspect of the current GRE has been rethought, tweaked or downright reinvented, and the Analytical Writing Assessment is no exception. The headline is that the pair of essays will no longer come with a constant set of instructions. Instead, the test will feature **variable instructions**, each more or less unique to its prompt. Seventeen examples have been released so far, with more promised in the months to come.

The bottom line is that examinees won't be able to rely on any set "writing formula." There will still be worthwhile general strategies for successful writing that preparers can and should practice. But each test taker will have the additional burden of following the specific instructions they're given.

The reason for the change? It appears that the testmakers want to target highly specific ways to approach a given topic. The positive spin would be to say that the current generic instructions permit an examinee to sink or swim on her own, while the new test will offer a lifeline. Let's see how this might work in practice. One standard writing task is to respond to some kind of proposed government policy. On the new GRE, it wouldn't be unusual to instruct the writer to "consider the implications if the policy is not implemented." Well, under current test practices, GRE examinees have always had the freedom to consider the implications of non-implementation –*provided that the idea had happened to occur to them*. The difference is that now they can be pointed in that particular direction, leading (it's to be hoped) to more fruitful brainstorming and a higher quality product. See what we mean by "lifeline"?

Closer reading of both directions and prompt, and more independent thinking, will be needed than ever before. All of which plays right into the testmakers' hands, in terms of the skills that they want to reward and that grad schools want to see.

Students will still be asked, fundamentally, to agree/disagree with an argument or to point out an argument's components. As such, those in command of argument fundamentals – evidence; conclusion; making reasonable assumptions; strengthening and weakening – will continue to enjoy an enormous edge. Moreover, the increased emphasis on argumentation in the Verbal arena of the GRE will have a positive spillover effect here: What learns in one area is sure to benefit the work on the other.





## The Final Assessment

Now that we've deconstructed and demystified the proposed GRE changes insofar as the testmakers have made them known, you're likely to have only one remaining question: *What do I do about them?* Two facts obtain here, and each might seem to send you to a different conclusion.

**Fact #1: Scores are good for five years.** Your freedom to take the current, known-quantity GRE now, and still apply to grad school well into the decade, might argue for doing so, on the proverbial grounds of "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't." It's hard to argue with that logic, as far as it goes. But then you have to factor in **Fact #2: No one should ever take a test until s/he is absolutely ready to do so.** Rushing to take the current "known" GRE if you're underprepared is just foolish. And if your time or financial circumstances mean that you simply can't prep properly in the foreseeable future, that would argue for waiting, as you study the additional insights and materials that come along and then take the new test whenever you're confident.

Taking everything into account, it seems clear that anyone who can get ready to prep for and take the current exam will have a *less complicated* road to success. Busy with building the revised exam, the GRE testmakers won't be messing with the current format, which means you can go into the current GRE with certainty about every one of its features.

That being said, if for whatever reason you're forced to wait till the revised GRE appears, *do not think of yourself as a "guinea pig."* That's the term many students derisively apply to the first examinees to tackle any new or revised exam.

But please remember this one additional fact: Kaplan has been through more test changes – radical and minor; nailbite-inducing and shoulder-shrugging – than anyone, period. And we know, from that long experience, that whether or not changes are dreaded, the student who prepares thoughtfully and knows what he's doing always gets through with flying colors. So those who take on the "new GRE" should instead think of themselves as pioneers. As long as you pick up the right map and compass and bearings, and pack your supply train in the way professionals like Kaplan can teach you, you can begin your trek with total confidence in yourself and your "support team." Without a doubt, you'll forge your way to a place where your career and life dreams will come true.