

fall 2011 | vol 16 | no 1

**www.psichi.org**

The International Honor Society in Psychology

**eye**  
on PSI CHI

# Bring It On: Preparing for the Graduate Record Examination **(GRE)**

Revisions in  
Graduate Record Exam Bring

**GOOD NEWS!**



# Bring It On: Preparing for the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

John Gomez, PhD  
Our Lady of the Lake University (TX)

**W**hen it comes to entering graduate school, there is something even more important than your grade point average (GPA). It's your Graduate Record Exam® (GRE) test scores. High scores can open doors to elite universities and even scholarship offers. Low GRE scores can deny opportunities to otherwise well-prepared and capable students.

The GRE is designed to measure critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills using verbal, quantitative, and writing tasks. It is credited with predicting graduate school grades and performance (Kuncel, Wee, Serafin & Hezlett, 2010). In practice, scores are used to determine eligibility for merit-based grants and fellowships, to award teaching and research assistantships, and to determine financial aid offers (American Psychological Association, 2010). At highly competitive universities, the GRE score is purportedly used as a filter (i.e., the applicant must achieve a certain score or above to even be considered for admission). Most graduate programs publish the average GRE scores for accepted students, and it is evident that a higher GRE score is associated with admission to these more competitive institutions.

## Nationally Standardized Test Levels the Playing Field

Because the GRE is a nationally standardized test, graduate schools know that the GRE scores are the only components of the application package that allow direct comparisons among individual students. College grading standards, and therefore GPA, may vary widely at different universities depending on coursework rigors, and admissions committees are aware of this. In contrast, the GRE

experience is a standardized neutral playing field, with everyone across the country taking the same test under the same conditions, thereby providing a better comparison between individual applicants. Unlike other components of the application package, the GRE scores are unambiguous: High scores are always impressive, and poor scores make any student look less capable.

Consider also an admissions committee's explanation for the discordance of a student's high GPA but low GRE scores. It appears that the student performs well according to the standards of their local university as suggested by their high GPA but performs poorly on the national stage provided by the GRE. This invites negative speculation about the quality of the education and faculty at the home university: Perhaps grades were inflated (i.e., it was easy to get an A). Such speculation undermines the student's entire transcript of grades. Additionally, this numerical discord—high GPA, low GRE—invites the perception that the student's letters of recommendation were written by those same professors who handed out the high praise represented by the high grades, undermining another critical component of the graduate school application package. The potential damage is significant when students perform poorly on the GRE. By understanding what makes this unique exam such a challenge, students can prepare to succeed.

## Why Students Struggle With the GRE

Students perform poorly on the GRE for at least two reasons: unexpected content and the wrong mindset. The GRE is unlike anything students encounter in college testing. It is imperative to preview the exam and study

practice materials in advance. Those who prepare themselves for a straightforward test of math and verbal skills will find they are chasing the wrong goal because the GRE is actually *a test of critical thinking skills*. Math, vocabulary, and writing are used merely as mediums to test these skills. Mental and emotional discipline also are needed to succeed. Keeping your composure when flustered is an important test-taking skill that must be practiced.

## Unexpected Content

Perhaps because the GRE is a standardized test typically taken in the last year of college, some students mistake its content for an exam covering what they learned in their undergraduate years. The content of the curriculum for a liberal arts degree does not appear on the GRE. Even the section titles—Verbal, Quantitative, and Analytical Writing—are misleading.

The GRE Verbal section essentially tests two things: the breadth of one's vocabulary and the ability to read and comprehend a particular kind of passage quickly and efficiently (Green & Wolf, 2009). While most students are compelled to expand their vocabulary in preparation for the GRE Verbal section, Educational Testing Services (ETS), makers of the GRE, is not interested in finding out if you are a walking dictionary, but rather if you have a broad and diverse vocabulary (Princeton Review, 2010). The math skills needed in the GRE Quantitative section include only arithmetic, algebra, and some geometry. Although many students fear the Math section, you only need to refresh your memory about basic high school math.

So how exactly does ETS use verbal and

math problems to test critical thinking skills? Here's an illustration: The Text Completion portion of the Verbal section asks you to find a word that fills out the meaning of a sentence. When seeking a contrast for a key word like *synchronous*, you don't even have to know the word's meaning if you know that the prefix *syn-* suggests 'together' or 'united' (think words like *synthesis*). You then can look for an answer choice that suggests a contrast like 'apart' or 'divided.' The GRE makers like to use words whose roots, prefixes, and suffixes offer clues to the correct answer, so in preparation you should study the meanings of these word parts.

Critical thinking, not math proficiency, is similarly assessed in the GRE Quantitative section. For example, if asked to determine the greater quantity of the product of two columns,  $37 \times 43$  (column A) or  $39 \times 47$  (column B), one approach is to do a lot of calculations, compare quantities for each column, and conclude that Column B is larger. In this case, GRE test writers want to examine if the test-taker is perceptive

enough to notice that the multiples in column B (39 and 47) are both larger than the multiples in column A (37 and 43); subsequently, no math calculation should be necessary to conclude that the product of Column B must be larger, too. One of the biggest surprises for GRE test-takers is *how little* math knowledge is essential to answer most questions.

ETS frequently incorporates shortcuts like this so that the perceptive test-taker is rewarded for a quick answer by having more time to answer the subsequent questions. The non-perceptive respondent is likely to answer fewer questions in the allotted time and ultimately achieves a lower score. ETS also sets out common repeating 'trap' answers that draw the respondent to select them. For example, a correct numeric answer may be shown but with an incorrect unit such as dollars instead of cents. Advanced knowledge of these unique test characteristics, of shortcuts and traps, can improve test performance.

### Wrong Mindset

The second reason why students perform poorly on the GRE is that they approach the task itself with the wrong mindset. Some think of standardized tests as cruel exercises, but such thinkers usually don't do well on the GRE (Kaplan, 2007). No one likes to be evaluated in a standardized test, but look at your performance on the GRE as a chance to show the graduate programs what you have to offer as a scholar. GRE high scorers choose to think of the test as a game. It is an opportunity for reward, not an instrument for punishment.

Treating the GRE as a game puts into context the weeks of studying necessary to 'win' or achieve high scores. If you play a video game enough times, you learn shortcuts and how to predict traps, and you inevitably improve. The same is true for preparing to take the GRE. Those who look forward to doing battle with the GRE—or at least who enjoy the opportunity to distinguish themselves from the rest of the applicant pack—tend to score better than do those

## Psi Chi Faculty Advisors: Teach a GRE Prep Course

**F**aculty advisors can help students by teaching a GRE preparation course as part of the university curriculum.

This should be a semester-long classroom review of the test components, with both lecture and in-class small group practice sessions. Focus on specific tactics for each section of the test. Explain standardization in testing and the practice effect and how even a few months of routine practice can boost a GRE score. A consistent theme throughout the semester should be managing the test experience itself, including anxiety, distraction, and fatigue. Barron's (Green & Wolf, 2009), Kaplan (2011), and Princeton Review (2010) provide excellent foundational textbooks with practice CD-ROMs and full-length practice tests.

### Advantages to Teaching a GRE Prep Course on Campus

As a university course, students enroll as part of their semester course load, and therefore the tuition expense is covered by their annual financial aid package. With the high cost (\$1000+) of any of the popular professional test prep services, the university-based GRE prep course brings the student an advantage most could never afford out-of-pocket.

Structuring the study task and providing motivation on a weekly basis are what students need most from the course instructor; otherwise, they could study on their own. The semester-long classroom format provides a supportive environment where the student can be among like-minded others for the months of

recommended study prior to the exam date. Encourage a social support network between classmates and act as both instructor and motivator.

It is common to deal with students who are trying to manage anxiety and frustration. Teach students that if they prepare, you have no reason to be afraid. They can relieve the anxiety of testing by repeated rehearsal of that situation, because the practice routine brings familiarity and confidence. Confidence in one's ability leads to quick, sure answers and an ease of concentration that translates into more points (Kaplan, 2007).

Too many students have no concrete plans for how to prepare themselves to take the GRE, even though low scores can undermine a student's otherwise strong graduate school application package. Faculty advisors can help students by teaching a GRE preparation course as part of the university curriculum. Mentoring students about graduate school extends into previewing the content of this important "entrance exam" and helping them develop the proper mindset. For further information, or to receive a sample course outline, please contact Dr. John Gomez.

### References

- Green, S. W., & Wolf, I. K. (2009). *Graduate record examination, 18th ed.* Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
- Kaplan, Inc. (2007). *GRE exam 2008 edition comprehensive program.* New York, NY: Kaplan Publishing.
- Kaplan, Inc. (2011). *New GRE strategies, practice and review, 2011-2012.* New York, NY: Kaplan Publishing.
- Princeton Review (2010). *Cracking the GRE, 2011 edition.* New York, NY: Random House, Inc.

who resent the task. Attitude adjustment has been proven to raise points (Kaplan, 2007).

Students are often surprised by the emotional discipline needed to succeed on the GRE. Keeping your composure is an important and test-taking skill that must be practiced. Only the very best test-takers are able to finish every section with time to spare, but even these people rarely get every question right. Dealing with some inevitable frustration makes the GRE also a test of self-discipline, revealing how you handle moments of struggle, whether you persist when flustered, and if you recover quickly after making mistakes. Losing a few extra points won't do you in but losing your head will (Green & Wolf, 2009).

A final related reason why some students struggle on the GRE is their lack of physical stamina for what can be a grueling experience. By test day, some students have not practiced the mental discipline needed to maintain focus during the three to four hours of testing and simply run out of gas on the final sections. For the new GRE starting in August 2011, you must be prepared to take up to seven timed sections on test day: two Analytical Writing essays, two Verbal sections, two Quantitative sections, and possibly an Experimental section in the form of a third Verbal or Quantitative section. Build your test-taking stamina by taking as many timed full-length practice tests as possible in the weeks leading up to the test. Rehearsal under the stress of timed conditions is essential.

## Practical Steps to Prepare for the GRE

What can you expect? The content of the GRE is predictable year after year, and this is precisely what makes the test so coachable. The concepts that are tested on any particular GRE are the underlying concepts at the heart of every GRE (Kaplan, 2007). Standardization and reliability of the instrument require that the GRE designers test the same concepts repeatedly, the psychometric characteristic that allows test results (actual scores) to remain comparable from year to year across students. Publishers of the *Barron's*, *Kaplan*, and *Princeton Review* study guides for the GRE have gathered innumerable examples and illustrations from past GREs of every possible type of question. Certain vocabulary words appear over and over again, as do variations of the same math questions (only the numbers change).

## Practice, Practice, Practice

A by-product of the standardized test and its predictable and unchanging content is the rarely discussed fact that your GRE scores are vulnerable to a *practice effect*. A practice effect (e.g., Kazdin, 2003) is a beneficial effect on any measure of knowledge caused by previous experience with the measurement instrument itself; as a result, the second and subsequent exposures to the unchanging instrument produces a higher knowledge score simply because of the repeated exposure, not necessarily because of new knowledge that's been gained in the interim. This explains why, although the GRE claims to measure capacities that have developed over a long period of time, even a few months of intensive study can improve your actual GRE scores (Green & Wolf, 2009). It is the same reason that test preparation services exist and why they can promise higher test scores or else they will allow you to repeat the service and gain even more practice. If hours of practice per day for weeks before the exam will raise your scores, then it is in your best interest to do so. Take advantage of the practice effect.

## A Plan of Study

It can be difficult to excel at studying for both coursework and the GRE in any single college semester but strive to make the GRE one of your highest academic priorities for the three months prior to the test date. While individual course grades for one semester contribute only a little to improve your overall college GPA, a single great GRE score can boost your entire application package.

Commit yourself to studying for one to two hours per day for five to six days a week for at least three consecutive months prior to test day. It will be hard, so remind yourself often that this level of commitment of time and energy is temporary. Plan to put in at minimum the weekly hours of study time equal to a three-credit college course. Establish a focused plan of study based upon your strengths and weaknesses by completing a diagnostic test and subsequently selecting appropriate lessons and practice from the study textbook.

It is vital to stick with the plan; as with any practice, little is gained if it is not methodical, and GRE skills cannot be 'crammed' in the final days before the exam (Kaplan, 2007). Practice at least some of the time by taking complete timed tests, preferably computerized. Practice under

time pressure so that you get accustomed to the pace and stress of the exam. If you feel great anxiety, consider taking complete practice tests once per week at least three consecutive weeks prior to the scheduled exam day. Take the test at the same time of day as your scheduled test and under similar test conditions (i.e., quiet place, timed test, no interruptions). When test day arrives, this routine will greatly lessen anxiety.

Take seriously your preparation for the GRE. Make studying one of your highest academic priorities in the months leading up to the exam. No one likes to be evaluated in a standardized test, but look at your performance on the GRE as a chance to show the graduate programs what you have to offer as a scholar. Your single GRE score can have far-reaching implications for your graduate school future.

## References

- American Psychological Association (2010). *Graduate study in psychology*. Washington, DC: APA.
- Green, S. W., & Wolf, I. K. (2009). *Graduate record examination*, 18th ed. Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc.
- Kaplan, Inc. (2007). *GRE exam 2008 edition comprehensive program*. New York, NY: Kaplan Publishing.
- Kazdin, A. E. (2003). *Research design in clinical psychology*, fourth edition. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kuncel, N. R., Wee, R., Serafin, L., & Hezlett, S. A. (2010). The validity of the graduate record examination for master's and doctoral programs: A meta-analytic investigation. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 70, 340-352.
- Princeton Review (2010). *Cracking the GRE, 2011 edition*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.



**Dr. John Gomez** teaches, mentors, and conducts research with undergraduate students in psychology at Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) in San Antonio, Texas. He has taught a university-based GRE preparation course since 2008 to students representing more than 20 majors on campus. Outcomes assessment in 2010 showed pretest-posttest average increases in students' GRE scores of 132 points in the Verbal section and 121 points in the Quantitative section on practice tests. Students' self-reported level of preparedness for the GRE also increased by a pretest-posttest average of 45 percentage points per student (on a 0% –100% preparedness scale). His course is one component of the OLLU Psychology Department's graduate-school-preparatory curriculum, which includes research- and counseling-based concentrations within the major (coursework designed to enhance the necessary knowledge base and skill set) and a university course teaching the graduate school application process. OLLU students and faculty maintain an active Psi Chi chapter, which recently hosted two regional Psi Chi research conferences. For more information about OLLU's model curriculum, please visit [www.ollusa.edu](http://www.ollusa.edu) or contact Dr. John Gomez at [jpgomez@ollusa.edu](mailto:jpgomez@ollusa.edu).