

Tips for the GRE Writing Portion

Issue Topic

Time limit: 45 minutes

What does the issue essay test?

The issue essay tests the writer's ability to create a perspective of an issue that may be controversial or there are clearly two sides of an issue.

What's the prompt?

The prompt is a statement in which the writer needs to either present that he or she agrees with the issue or disagrees with the issue.

What do I have to do?

The writer will pick a side- either agreeing with the statement or disagreeing with the statement. Then, the writer will use reasons and/or evidence to back up his or her ideas.

What should I be thinking while reading the prompt?

- Do I agree with all or any part of the prompt? If so, what backs up my thoughts?
- Am I acknowledging the complexity of the issue?
- Brainstorm a few points for *both sides* of the issue. This is called addressing the counter-argument. By addressing the counter-argument, it strengthens your own position.
- What examples can I use to back up my position? You can use examples from your personal experiences, readings, or hypothetical situations.

What should I do when writing?

Keep in mind that you only have 45 minutes to write the essay, so spend no more than 3-4 minutes brainstorming and jotting notes. Take the most relevant and evidence-based points you have and write the essay. The best format to use while writing for the GRE is the five-paragraph essay. Although it is not the best for writing essays, it is the best format for this. If there is any time left over, **PROOFREAD**. The readers will look down on a misuse of "*their, there, and they're.*"

- Address the counterargument
- Put your **own opinion** in the paper. The readers do not care which stance the writer takes. They care about how well the writer backs up ideas.
- Put no more than **THREE SENTENCES** in your conclusion. You are simply summing up your ideas.

EXAMPLES:

Present your perspective on the issue below, using relevant reasons and/or examples to support your views. *Remember, the best way to prepare is to allow ONLY 45 minutes to write the essay, which will simulate the testing time.

"Important truths begin as outrageous, or at least uncomfortable, attacks upon the accepted wisdom of the time."

"Originality does not mean thinking something that was never thought before; it means putting old ideas together in new ways."

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

"It is always an individual who is the impetus for innovation; the details may be worked out by a team, but true innovation results from the enterprise and unique perception of an individual."

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

"The study of an academic discipline alters the way we perceive the world. After studying the discipline, we see the same world as before, but with different eyes."

"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."

Argument Task

Time limit: 30 minutes

What does it test?

The goal of this section is to test your critical reasoning and analytical writing skills. In addition to the specific requirements of the task, you are once more being scored on how effectively you organize and develop your essay and your adherence to standards of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

What's the prompt?

Unlike the Issue Task, you are only given one prompt. This prompt comes in the form of an argument. Like any argument, it rests on certain claims and forms a conclusion.

What do I have to do?

Your job is to write an essay which **critiques** the argument. You must analyze what assumptions the argument makes and its logic/reasoning. You can also examine how the argument could be improved or what additional information could help you evaluate it. Remember: you are **not** being asked if the statements are true, or to agree or disagree with the argument. You should **not** present your own views on the subject.

What should I be thinking about when reading the prompt?

There are going to be at least three major problems in the argument's use of evidence and/or reasoning. You will want to read the prompt more than once. When reading the prompt, ask yourself:

- What is **offered** as evidence, support, or proof of the claims?
- What is **explicitly** stated/claimed?
- What is **assumed** to be true? This may be without justification or proof.
- What is **not** explicitly stated that you conclude as a result of the argument?
- How do these elements link together? **Does the argument make logical connections?**
- What are **alternative explanations** for the events described in the prompt?
- What are **counterexamples**, real or hypothetical, that disproves an aspect of the argument?
- What **extra information** could support or weaken the argument?
- What **changes** could be made to improve the argument?

How should I write my essay?

Begin by taking a few minutes to **brainstorm** on your planning paper any potential responses to the questions above. When you feel like you have enough solid points to build an essay on,

choose those that seem **most important**. You have a limited amount of time, so you want to devote your time to developing your strongest points rather than listing every example you could think of. Although in a real classroom setting you might never need to use this format, the **five-paragraph essay** may help here to avoid thinking too long on how to organize your analysis. Your paragraphs could be:

- An introduction which states explicitly what is being argued
- A discussion of the evidence used to support the argument and assumptions that the argument makes
- A discussion of how these elements link together to structure the argument
- A discussion of extra information that would strengthen the argument or counterexamples that may weaken the argument
- A conclusion that discusses what changes could be made to the argument and reiterates your analysis

Use any time you have left over to review your essay for content. As you do this, keep an eye out for errors in spelling and grammar.

Example Approaches to the Argument Task

Below is an example of an argument task topic:

The following appeared in a memorandum written by the vice president of Nature's Way, a chain of stores selling health food and other health-related products.

"Previous experience has shown that our stores are most profitable in areas where residents are highly concerned with leading healthy lives. We should therefore build our next new store in Plainsville, which has many such residents. Plainsville merchants report that sales of running shoes and exercise clothing are at all-time highs. The local health club, which nearly closed five years ago due to lack of business, has more members than ever, and the weight training and aerobics classes are always full. We can even anticipate a new generation of customers: Plainsville's schoolchildren are required to participate in a 'fitness for life' program, which emphasizes the benefits of regular exercise at an early age."

A five-to-ten minute brainstorm might yield the following ideas for critiquing the argument:

- Although Plainsville residents seem to be concerned with physical fitness, this may or may not have a correlation with an interest in healthy eating. If they are interested in healthy eating, a local grocery store might already be fulfilling these needs (possibly at lower prices).
- Is the increase in sales of exercise clothing and enrollment in the health club a continuing trend? The timing of this spike could be important – if it is early in the year, New Year's resolutions could account for this interest. Such an increase in business would not continue if that was the case. In addition, there are no specific numbers given for the size

of the classes or the increase in enrollment. Classes might cap at twenty or thirty members, but if there is only one health club for a town of thousands of people these classes are going to fill up. There may have also been an increase in the adult population over the past five years in Plainsville which is not accounted for in this argument. That would better explain the increase in business, rather than a sudden change of mindset.

- Would the schoolchildren of Plainsville necessarily stay in their hometown once they are old enough to make decisions about which stores to shop at? Many of these children will likely move away for college or a career, which would not benefit a local Nature's Way store. This new generation of customers might shop at Nature's Way elsewhere, but it wouldn't maintain Plainsville's business. While a "fitness for life" program might encourage them to be more active, would it teach them about healthy eating habits?

*However you choose to approach this, remember that you are not being asked to agree or disagree with the argument. You should focus on what elements of the topic need to be clearer/stronger to form a more developed argument.