

*Preparing for GRE and TOEFL on the run!*¹

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This document is directed towards people wanting to improve their GRE or TOEFL scores in the next few weeks. It also provides some links to the materials that can be used. This guide is based on my experience with the exams and is in no way comprehensive.

The scores of both GRE-General test and TOEFL are required by most universities while applying for Masters in any field of Engineering in the USA. While not a deciding factor for your admissions both these tests can and do serve as a red-flag for adcom members when they are reviewing your application. A stellar GRE/TOEFL score may not help you get into your program of choice if the rest of your profile does not support it however a low GRE/TOEFL score might stop you from getting shortlisted for review by the adcom members.

Talking about what makes me knowledgeable enough to create a guide about GRE and TOEFL, well I am not an expert in the exam pattern of either GRE or TOEFL however I am sharing my experiences which helped me move from a score of 323 (170Q, 153V) to a score of 338 (170Q, 168V, 5.0AWA) in my final exam from just 14-20 days of serious preparation. My TOEFL score is 119 (30R, 30L, 29S, 30W).

Graduate Record Examinations (GRE)

About The Test

GRE is a standardized test used by US universities to sort students and use as a cutoff for the initial shortlisting process. Aspirants interested in pursuing a master's degree, specialized master's course, MS, MBA, MEM or doctoral degree can sit for the GRE Test.

To begin with if you are planning to apply for Fall 2018 and have not given GRE yet or plan to regive GRE it is not late yet and many universities have deadlines after 15th January. However, you do need to book your test dates ASAP and start preparing for the exam immediately. Once you have done that you need to read the first chapter of the ETS official guide for GRE ² to gain more knowledge about the exam pattern and contents. If you have already given GRE and are planning to reattempt it, I would still advise you to read the first chapter to be clear about the exam pattern and what it entails.

Once you have completely understood the pattern of the GRE General test it is time to give your first mock test and get to know more about your weaknesses. While we are on topic of GRE mock

² The book can be found at: ETS GRE Guide.pdf. Read the first chapter "About the GRE's revised General Test".

tests, I would suggest you buy one of the Manhattan GRE Verbal Guides ³ as you get the pack of six full-length Manhattan GRE Practice tests free with the same. These tests are one of the best according to me and are a steal at this price.

If you have the Manhattan GRE tests from a friend or have bought them already you can give one of those else you can give one of the ETS official mock tests ⁴. I would suggest giving one of the Manhattan tests if you have them readily available as it allows you to save the ETS mock test for the end as it is the closest mock-up of the actual test you can get. You need to sit down in a timed 3hr 30min stretch while giving your first mock test to mimic the actual test conditions (Always give the AWA section with your GRE timed test and do not overlook the same).

After giving your first GRE mock test, it is time to analyze your performance. You need to analyze each question and understand which type of questions have been giving you a problem and make a note of all the mistakes you have been making. Understanding both which question type and which subtopic are problematic for you is very important at this stage and you need to devote a few hours for the same.

GRE Quant

Depending on your score in the practice test you will need to approach each of the sections differently. In Quant I would like to classify the score in three categories: 160-170 (Good score), 150-160 (Work on improvement if you are decent in verbal and have time), 130-150 (Need to improve for an MS application).

If you got a 160+ score in the practice test you can easily improve your score to get 165+ or even a 170 and is one of the easiest ways to improve your overall GRE score. First of all you need to pin-point what difficulties you had in the practice test and what decreases your score. Some of the general problems people face include but are not limited to:

1. You faced a shortage of time and were not able to complete all the questions in the test. In this case you need to remember that all questions in the test have a similar score value and getting stuck on a difficult question for 5min will severely hamper your chances of getting a good score in the section. You need to keep track of time while doing the test and refrain from spending more than 2 minutes on any of the questions. One thing that helped me a lot for getting a full score in Quant was completing the test in 20-25 minutes and then using the remaining 10-15 minutes to re-attempt

³ The books can be found at: GRE Reading Comprehension and Essays (Manhattan Prep GRE Strategy Guides) and GRE Text Completion and Sentence Equivalence (Manhattan Prep GRE Strategy Guides)).

⁴ The mock test should be bought with the GRE test booking. You can find out more about the same at: ETS Official Mock Tests.

all the questions again (Do not just go through the answers you have already marked, instead reattempt the question as you might have missed some details while reading the question and a fresh mindset might help you correct the mistake). I did this for any question I had the tiniest bit of doubt about and it almost always helped me correct at least one mistake I had made. PRACTICE MORE TIMED TESTS to improve your timing issue.

2. If you are facing issues in a specific type of problem or a specific topic then you need to clear your concepts about the same. This can be done by going through both the ETS Official Guide and reading up on the topic and going through the Manhattan Strategy Guide⁵ of the topic. Once you have cleared your concepts in the area you should practice problems about the same extensively and you will soon see improvement in your mock test scores.

⁵ The books can be found at: Manhattan Strategy Guides

If you got a 150-160 score in your practice test then it is most likely a combination of lack of sufficient time to complete all the questions and lack of clarity in the concepts of one or multiple areas.

1. Read the Quant sections from the ETS official guide for GRE ⁶ and attempt all questions given in the guide to start with. This should clear out your basic problems in Quant and help you pinpoint other problems you are facing in Quant when you give your next Practice test.
2. Give another practice test to pinpoint the problems that remain. If you have completed the above step your score should have improved and you can move on to reading the Manhattan Strategy Guide ⁷ of the particular topic and solving questions from the Manhattan 5lb. Book⁸ for any topics you are facing problems in. While many people find the Manhattan 5lb. book tedious and boring it helps a lot in clearing your misconceptions and improve your score in the real exam.
3. Finally, give as many timed practice tests as you can as it will be most helpful in helping you improve your score in the final exam. (PS. Read the section for 160+ score once your score improves)

⁶ The book can be found at: ETS GRE Guide.pdf.

⁷ The books can be found at: Manhattan Strategy Guides

⁸ The books can be found at: Manhattan 5lb. Book

If you got a score below 150 in your practice test it is most likely majorly a result of you not remembering the concepts clearly of multiple sections and you will need to focus on your Quant section before you even move on to improving your Verbal score as a good Quant score is considered more important than a good Verbal score by adcoms.

1. Read the Quant sections from the ETS official guide for GRE ⁹ and attempt all questions given in the guide to start with. This should

⁹ The book can be found at: ETS GRE Guide.pdf.

clear out your basic problems in Quant. You should move on to both the Manhattan Strategy guides and the 5lb. Book ¹⁰ from here and practice as many problems as you can from the 5lb. book.

2. After 4-5 days of practice you should be done with most of the problems in these books and have a firmer grasp of the concepts in Quant and you should see a considerable improvement in your score when you give practice tests. (Once you see an improvement in your score read the sections for 160+ score or 150-160 score to improve your score further.)

Most of the problems people face in Quant can be easily solved if they clear their concepts and practice enough mock tests. If you are getting a low score in Quant focusing on it is the easiest and fastest way to improve your overall GRE score. However, do not get stuck on improving your Quant score after reaching a score of 160-165 as a lot depends on the conditions on the test day. Just keep practicing mock tests and you will be golden.

GRE Verbal

GRE Verbal is the most feared section of the GRE General test among test takers over the Indian subcontinent. Not having been acquainted with GRE Vocabulary and complicated Reading Comprehensions in our schools and colleges most people find GRE Verbal the hardest part of the exam.

GRE Verbal section can broadly be divided into three question types: Text Completion Questions, Reading Comprehensions, Sentence Equivalence Questions. To begin with you need to understand all three question types by reading the ETS official guide for GRE ¹¹. Once you have understood all three question types and how they are scored you can move on to understanding the problems you are facing in each sub-section.

Text Completion Questions base themselves on your knowledge of GRE level vocabulary and understanding of English grammar and sentence structure. Though, if you are having problems in all three sections of GRE Verbal I would suggest starting with improving your Reading Comprehensions as they are the easiest to improve of the three and account for 50% of the verbal questions.

1. To improve your performance in the Text Completion section you need to begin with improving your Vocabulary. For that I would suggest using the following schedule depending on the amount of time you have: begin with Barron's 333 most frequent GRE Words ¹². DON'T JUST MEMORIZE THE WORDS AND THEIR DEFINITIONS BUT UNDERSTAND THEIR USAGE IN

¹⁰ The books can be found at: Manhattan Strategy Guides and Manhattan 5lb. Book

¹¹ The book can be found at: ETS GRE Guide.pdf.

¹² The wordlist can be found at: Barron's 333 most frequent GRE Words.

SENTENCES TOO. For the above I would suggest getting the Barron's Essential Words for GRE ¹³ as it has nice example usage and is the perfect wordlist to follow up the Barron's 333 most frequent words. Finally if you have time left or if you like studying word-lists on your way to work you should try out the Magoosh GRE app ¹⁴. The more time you have for preparation the more words you should try to study.

2. If you have a bit of time at hand then one very good way to improve your reading comprehension and grammar along with your Vocabulary is reading articles from sources like New York Times, The Economist, Hindustan Times etc. While reading these articles I would suggest using Professor Word ¹⁵ as it combines learning new words with understanding complicated sentences and topics simultaneously. This method should be used along with the word lists for people who are not used to reading a lot in their daily life as it gets them accustomed to doing GRE level reading.
3. Finally I would like to mention the usage of the Magoosh English Grammar Practice ¹⁶ for a basic overview. I am also a very strong supporter of creating your own set of flash cards for the final 10-12 days of vocabulary practice as going through the usual word-lists gives you a false sense of accomplishment from the words you already knew and you don't get as much practice as need on the words giving you trouble. For this purpose I used the Vocabulary Trainer Flashcards app ¹⁷ to create my own word-lists and revise them in the last few days of my GRE preparation.
4. I would also suggest getting as much practice as possible from the Manhattan 5lb. book as learning from example always has a bigger impact on your mind than simple rote learning.

Reading Comprehension Questions account for 50% of the total verbal questions in GRE and are the easiest among the three classes. That is not to say that Reading Comprehension Questions are easy as they provide challenges of their own.

1. People with an extensive reading habit find this section easier than others. However, I would suggest going through the Manhattan Strategy Guide for Reading Comprehensions ¹⁸ to start with. The tips and tricks given in this book proved to be very useful to me and drastically improved my RC score over a few days.
2. One of the best things to help with improving your RC score is extensive practice. You can get sample RC questions from the Manhattan 5lb. book or the RC-99 passages ¹⁹. Practice RC questions in a timed manner even when doing sample questions from these sources. You can give single question RCs around 2 min, 2-3

¹³ The book can be found at: Barron's Essential Words for GRE

¹⁴ The app can be found at: Magoosh GRE app.

¹⁵ The application highlights GRE and SAT level words in the article on your browser and helps you understand their meaning while reading the article. It can be found at: Professor Word.

¹⁶ It contains decks of different types of English grammar tests. It can be found out at: Magoosh English Grammar Practice.

¹⁷ This app allows you to classify words into levels of knowledge and helps you learn the words accordingly. It can be found at: Vocabulary Trainer Flashcards.

¹⁸ The books can be found at: Manhattan Strategy Guides.

¹⁹ These books can be found at: Manhattan 5lb. Book and RC-99 Passages each.

question RCs around 3-4 minutes and RCs with 4+ questions 5-6 minutes to solve. Following all the instructions provided by the Manhattan Strategy Guides helped me improve my RC accuracy from around 50-60% to 90+%. Hence, I would strongly suggest using them.

3. Manhattan Strategy Guides mention another type of RCs known as argument-type RCs which are somewhat different from normal RCs and need different techniques to be solved. Learn to identify these and solve accordingly as around 2-3 of these come throughout your GRE test.

Sentence Equivalence Questions are the devil's work for anyone who is not good with GRE vocabulary as they require the knowledge of the usage of words, synonyms, sentence structure and much more. Entering a guess as an answer has very less chances of turning out correctly if you haven't eliminated some of the answer choices to start with. However, this does not mean you should not take chances with guesses as GRE has no negative marking and all points are valuable when you are running out of time.

1. To solve Sentence Equivalence Questions you have to follow all the steps you have taken for Text Completion Questions and add to it a better understanding of synonyms and sentence structure. GRE Test makers will many times provide two sets of synonyms in the answer sets to confuse test takers so attention needs to be paid to that.
2. You can follow the following materials²⁰ for Sentence Equivalence Questions: Barron's Essential Words for GRE, Manhattan Strategy Guides, Manhattan 5lb. Book, Magoosh English Grammar Practice and others which have been mentioned earlier.

²⁰ Barron's Essential Words for GRE; Manhattan Strategy Guides; Manhattan 5lb. Book; Magoosh English Grammar Practice.

In my experience GRE Verbal is not a big hassle if approached the correct way. Using the correct techniques and enough practice it is easy to attain a good score after a few weeks of practice. As with all other sections the key to achieving a good score in GRE Verbal is keeping your wits about you during the exam and not giving it too much thought. Just go give the the exam as you would any practice test and you should be scoring excellent marks in no time.

GRE Analytical Writing

The final but not any less crucial piece to the GRE puzzle is the GRE Analytical Writing Task. Many people tend to look at the AWA task as unnecessary and unimportant when that is far from truth.

Most universities have a lower cutoff for AWA and not clearing that can be a bad way of getting rejected from an admit. On top of all this, GRE AWA is the first section you face in the exam and if you get stuck while writing these essays it has high chances of affecting your confidence and overall scoring ability in the exam.

1. One of the biggest tips of succeeding in getting an above average or good score in AWA is always practicing the AWA portion of the exam whenever you give a mock test. This technique helps you both with getting used to the exam pattern in real life conditions and helps improve your writing skills. Whenever you write an essay for a mock test it always helps to get it reviewed by your friends, colleagues and teachers as any inputs they provide will help improve your writing skills and improve your score on exam-day.
2. You can go through the following materials ²¹ to further improve your performance during the exam: ETS Official Book for GRE, ETS AWA Question Pool, Guide to Argument Essay and Manhattan Strategy Guides.

²¹ ETS GRE Guide.pdf; ETS AWA Question Pool; Guide to Argument Essay and Manhattan Strategy Guides.

My final advice to everyone for improving your GRE score is giving Mock Tests. Give as many mock tests as possible and analyze your performance after each mock test. This helps you understand your strengths and weaknesses and helps you concentrate your efforts on that area of study.

Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

About The Test

TOEFL or Test of English as a Foreign Language is an English Proficiency test, conducted to evaluate the English speaking and understanding ability of a candidate. TOEFL is accepted as proof of English proficiency in 9,000 colleges, universities and organizations and other TOEFL participating institutes across 130 countries in the World. TOEFL is conducted more than 50 times a year by Educational Testing Service (ETS).

The TOEFL test comprises of four sections:

1. The Reading section is 60-80 minutes long comprising of 36-56 questions where you have to read 3 or 4 passages from academic texts and answer questions. You can get a score from 0-30 in this section.
2. The Listening section is 60-90 minutes long comprising of 34-51 questions where you have to listen to lectures, classroom discus-

sions and conversations, then answer questions.. You can get a score from 0-30 in this section.

3. The Speaking section is 20 minutes long comprising of 36-56 questions where you have to express an opinion on a familiar topic; speak based on reading and listening tasks. You can get a score from 0-30 in this section.
4. The Writing section is 50 minutes long comprising of 2 questions where you have to write essay responses based on reading and listening tasks; support an opinion in writing. . You can get a score from 0-30 in this section.

Reading Section

The TOEFL Reading section²² is quite easy compared to its GRE counterpart. It is basically just fact finding and reporting from the passages which tests you at a High School English level. Some students face a problem in this section because of its length as someone who doesn't have a regular reading habit might feel exhausted after the section. And if getting an experimental section on this one just makes things worse. To overcome that problem my advice would be to be ready for the length and develop your stamina for long reading sessions.

To prepare yourself for the reading section, read a whole lot of books. I have developed rapid reading by reading plenty of books. Any books will do for that matter. you should just have the patience to sit and read a thousand words in a single stretch. If you develop that skill then the reading section is a piece of cake. Now in the week before the exam, start going through different types of paragraphs which are similar to the ones appearing. For at least 2 days in that week concentrate on reading, yes just reading.

Listening Section

To describe the listening section²³, it has 6-9 passages, each containing 5-6 questions, which lasts about 60-90 minutes. The conversations varies from simple conversations between 2 students to a lecture on a subject. Do not worry, you are not needed to have a knowledge on the spoken subject. All answers are in the conversations.

When in the exam, you are given a sheet of paper to take notes. The listening passages are based on academic type environments and campus-type environments. Again if you are regular English

²² Mastering Skill for TOEFL IBT Reading; The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test; Magoosh TOEFL Speaking & English Learning.

²³ NoteFULL; The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test; Magoosh TOEFL Speaking & English Learning.

listener then you should not have any problem with this section. This sections, however, requires very good note taking skills. I found NOTEFULL's note taking strategies to be very helpful. Here you also kinda need to have luck. The reason being, the test goes on at different paces in the classroom. So while you are having your listening test your neighbor or neighbors might have their speaking test. So you end up being surrounded by 2-3people who are speaking at the top of your voices and you are trying to listen carefully in the headphones.

Speaking Section

To describe the speaking section²⁴, you'll answer six questions on various topics; the first ones will be opinion-based. For these questions, you will hear the question and then have 15 seconds to collect your thoughts and form an opinion. Then you will speak for 45 seconds. The speaking section also contains "integrated" questions. For these, you'll have to incorporate outside information from a short reading passage and a short lecture excerpt or conversation into your answer. Integrated questions will give you slightly longer to collect your thoughts (20 or 30 seconds) and 60 seconds to give your answer.

Always LISTEN to the instructions given before EACH section. In this section you are supposed to speak. The exam records your voice and sends it to the evaluator. Before beginning the section, your voice will be calibrated.

1. Speak slowly and clearly. Do not, I repeat DO NOT elongate your speech by adding "umm", "hmmm", "eh", or any other dragging bits.
2. Do not complicate your vocabulary. Try to communicate clearly. Learn a few synonyms for the words you already know.
3. Focus on the task the given problem expects you to complete and do not stray from it, ending up talking about nonsensical topics.
4. Do not get distracted by other people attempting the speaking section at the same time as you and focus on your own test.

Writing Section

There are mainly two tasks in TOEFL writing section²⁵, first one is Independent Writing task and Integrated Writing task. Always LISTEN to the instructions given before EACH section.

²⁴ NoteFULL; The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test; Magoosh TOEFL Speaking & English Learning.

²⁵ NoteFULL; The Official Guide to the TOEFL Test; Magoosh TOEFL Speaking & English Learning.

1. Read as many sample essays as possible. The more you read, the more familiar you become with the structure and tone of the essay.
2. Make sure you can write 300–400 words essay at a stretch within 30 minutes.
3. Needless to say, Grammar is important. High School level vocabulary and grammar are not recommended. Graduate level grammar is highly recommended.
4. Always try to complete your essay 5 minutes before time, so that you can tweak your essay in the end. You can check for any grammatical or spelling mistakes and edit them.
5. Use transition words like Firstly, Secondly, Thirdly, Moreover, Additionally, In contrast etc.
6. Present the points exactly as mentioned in the reading paragraph and lecture. The relationship between is also important.
7. The essay structure is very important. Introduction -> Content Paragraphs -> Conclusion.

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